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The Role of Policing in Sex Workers' Access to Justice

RESEACH REPORT | December 2024

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France	Syndicat du Travail Sexuel (STRASS)
Greece	Red Umbrella Athens (RUA) Sex Workers' Empowerment Network (SWEN)
The Netherlands	Sex Workers Against Violence & Exploitation (SAVE)
North Macedonia	Association for Support of Marginalised Workers STAR-STAR Skopje
Poland	Kolektyw Kamelia (formerly Sex Work Polska)
Spain	Comité de Apoyo a las Trabajadoras del Sexo (CATS)
Sweden	Red Umbrella Sweden (RUS)
Switzerland	ProCoRe
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AUTHORSHIP

Agata Dziuban and Chloe Dominic authored the report.

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The study you hold in your hands represents a significant moment in the rich history of the sex workers' movement in Europe.

This is the first time a study of this calibre has been conducted primarily by sex workers themselves, from the planning, the structure, the selection of the national groups that would conduct it, the implementation, data collection, analysis and review, to the presentation that has now reached your hands (or your screen). The study is also historic in our region due to the number of people interviewed, which has helped us to present a more complete picture of the realities faced by sex workers in 11 European countries. While these countries differ greatly from one another, the problems that sex workers encounter remain remarkably similar.

The focus of this study originated from ESWA members who participated in an earlier, smaller study on access to justice. That research, completed in 2020, identified a major barrier to equal access to justice: the police, who are often the first point of contact for sex workers – and indeed for citizens in general – when seeking justice.

Many EU Member States, as well as their citizens and residents, often hold a distorted yet positive image of law enforcement agencies. The image that most Western and Northern governments have striven to project is of law enforcement agencies that prioritise the welfare of everyone living in their territories, regardless of race, immigration status, and occupation. This image is often built on the premise, 'If you don't break the law, you have nothing to fear'. However, many situations not covered by the law – or left to the discretion of individual police officers on duty – remain hidden from the general public, as they disproportionately affect racialised people and migrants who often depend on the informal economy to survive.

Of course, conducting this study required a great deal of internal reflection on how to approach the questions, with careful attention given to minimising the risk of re-traumatising respondents who had experienced negative interactions with police officers during our interviews.

Likewise, analysing the interviews has been both challenging and emotionally taxing for the research team. The accounts of inhumane treatment endured by our colleagues at the hands of officials – who, in theory, are supposed to protect those in need – were especially difficult to process. To so clearly confirm that abuses of authority against sex workers persist, even in states where the police are generally held in high regard, has been a reality check for many.

Indeed, this study is not an easy read, but we believe that there are no simple solutions to such structural problems as the very nature and purpose of state security forces and the inequalities they largely perpetuate.

I invite you to read this study with the utmost empathy and objectivity. If you have the ability to distribute it or share it with individuals who might influence change, please do so. At the very least, we hope it provides you with a clearer understanding of how police forces actually operate and what those in charge may be concealing from us.

On behalf of the ESWA team and the national organisations involved, I sincerely thank you for your interest in this study created by and for the sex worker community.

In solidarity,

Sabrina Sanchez
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Sex workers are a globally criminalised, stigmatised, and marginalised group (Amnesty International [AI], 2016a, 2022; Macioti *et al.*, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects [NSWP], 2022; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Vuolajärvi, 2022). A large body of research shows that criminalising sex work and enforcing other harsh policies negatively impacts sex workers' health and safety at work, leaving them especially vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Platt *et al.*, 2018; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023). Studies reveal that, despite facing high levels of violence, sex workers rarely report abuse or other crimes to the police (Crago *et al.*, 2021; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Struyf, 2022). Research also indicates that sex workers encounter various barriers when seeking justice as victims of crime. This increases their risk of violence and harassment and allows perpetrators to act with a sense of impunity.

The criminalisation of sex work, along with other restrictive laws targeting sex workers, is seen as a key factor limiting their ability to access protection and justice after being victimised (Campbell & Sanders, 2021; NSWP, 2020). These laws encourage law enforcement to focus on surveilling and punishing sex workers rather than ensuring their safety and well-being, creating opportunities for misconduct and abuse of power by law enforcement officers. Studies show that in many places police neglect, inaction, and mistreatment are common, and crimes against sex workers are neither taken seriously nor treated with the necessary caution (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Kloek & Dijkstra, 2018; Krüsi *et al.*, 2016; Struyf, 2022). Alarmingly, research also reveals that police officers themselves are among the perpetrators of discrimination, violence, and abuse against sex workers (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Dewey & St. Germain, 2014; Kinnel, 2008; Klambauer, 2018; Platt *et al.*, 2018; Sherman *et al.*, 2015; Crago, 2009, 2015). As a result, rather than being seen as protectors, the police are often viewed by sex worker communities as a "repressive force that causes more harm than good" (Campbell & Sanders, 2021: 88). This creates a deep mistrust of law enforcement, which is one of the main reasons why sex workers frequently choose not to report violence and thus remain excluded from legal protections (NSWP, 2020; Struyf, 2022).

With a focus on Europe,[1] this report examines the main challenges faced by sex workers while interacting with the justice system. We understand the justice system as a set of measures, social rules, and procedures aimed at ensuring that every person's fundamental human rights are realised and protected. This research, however, captures the ways in which actors in the justice system overuse and misuse criminal law and administrative regulations to punish and marginalise sex workers who are seen as violating mainstream social norms. Our report focuses specifically on the impact of policing on sex workers' access to justice by exploring the role law enforcement plays in removing and reducing or producing and exacerbating miscarriages of justice against sex workers.

Our focus on the police and policing is motivated by several reasons. Firstly, the police is an institution that is formally charged by states to enforce the law and maintain social order (Garriott, 2013; Moore, 2022). This places the police in a dual role concerning sex workers:

1 According to the World Health Organisations' definition of Europe.

both as enforcers of sex work laws and other related policies and as assumed providers of protection and facilitators of justice. This duality often creates tension, as law enforcement strategies that prioritise punishment and control – such as in countries where sex work is criminalised – can undermine the protective role of the police and create barriers to sex workers' access to justice (Klambauer, 2018; Sanders & Laing, 2018). Our research focuses on this tension and examines how law enforcement-driven policing affects sex workers' right to legal protection, both as victims of crime and when targeted as offenders.

Secondly, as enforcers of the law, the police are often the first point of contact for sex workers seeking justice after victimisation or for those accused of breaking the law. Police conduct, or misconduct, at this initial stage can greatly influence sex workers' ability to exercise their rights – whether as victims or offenders – over the course of the legal process, such as during trials or court proceedings. Our research examines the role of the police as gatekeepers of justice for sex workers at this critical first stage.[2]

Thirdly, understanding how policing helps or hinders sex workers' access to justice is especially important in light of increasing calls to further criminalise sex work across Europe. Some feminist advocates and organisations, purportedly in the name of protecting women, are pushing for laws that criminalise buying sex and the profits made from sex work. These feminists, often referred to as 'carceral feminists' (Bernstein, 2012; Canessa, 2022; Gruber, 2020; Law, 2014), argue for the use of criminal law to target sex workers' clients, workplaces, co-workers, or bosses. They portray sex workers as victims without agency, who need to be 'saved' through criminalisation. In recent years, such punishment-oriented approaches have gained increased traction among European policymakers both at the national and the European Union level. These strategies are often presented as straightforward responses to complex social issues, with criminalisation framed as a 'magic solution' capable of resolving wider social problems (Struzik *et al.*, 2024; Garland, 2001). However, this focus on punishment frequently comes at the expense of broader principles like social justice, rights access, solidarity, and care. Efforts to criminalise sex work – similar to calls for the criminalisation of migration or drug use – often also lead to increased policing and harsher law enforcement tactics compromising sex workers' safety and rights (Struzik *et al.*, 2024). With that in mind, this report examines the impact of criminalisation and other sex work policies and related law enforcement practices on sex workers' access to justice. We seek to evaluate whether current policy and legislative interventions as well as strategies of their implementation across Europe effectively reduce barriers to justice or, conversely, contribute to the further marginalisation of sex workers and their exclusion from legal protections.

This report looks into the relationship between sex workers and the police in 11 countries in Europe. It was developed as part of ESWA's *Accessing Justice: The role of policing in sex workers' experience of justice* project, which brought together 13 sex worker-led and sex worker rights organisations from Armenia, Belgium, France, Greece, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. While the impact of policing on sex workers' under-reporting of violence has been studied in some contexts,

2 Research focused on challenges faced by sex workers in the later stages of the justice process would be of key importance.

particularly in the UK (Bowen *et al.*, 2021; Campbell & Sanders, 2021; Sanders & Laing, 2018), there is limited research on how policing affects sex workers' access to justice across the broader European region or in the countries selected for this project (Kloek & Dijkstra, 2018; Ślęzak, 2023). This report addresses that gap by providing evidence on the specific ways sex work is policed across different parts of Europe, socio-political contexts, and legal jurisdictions.

Findings presented in this report draw from in-depth interviews with sex workers and demonstrate their first-hand experiences of policing and challenges when trying to access justice in different legal models of sex work: criminalisation, partial criminalisation, Swedish model, and regulation. (A more detailed description of those legal frameworks is provided below.) In addition to examining the impact of legal models on the policing of sex work, we explore how various factors – such as the forms and settings of sex work, and demographic characteristics like migration status, sexuality, and gender – influence how sex workers in Europe are being policed, and what barriers they face when trying to access justice. For instance, existing literature indicates that sex workers working in the open scene are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement as part of gentrification efforts or other policies oriented towards cleansing of the public space (Scoular & Sanders, 2010). A substantial body of research also suggests that the frequency and severity of police interactions increase with a person's marginalisation, with migrant, racialised, and gender non-conforming communities made particularly vulnerable to heightened policing (Equinox, 2021; European Network Against Racism [ENAR], 2021; Fair Trials, 2022; Legal Action Group, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Recognising this, our report also seeks to capture the experiences of sex workers who have, throughout history, been overpoliced or faced multiple forms of marginalisation. We aim to assess whether their access to justice is further impeded by the intersecting effects of stigmatisation, discrimination, and legal repression.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

'Access to justice' is a broad term that refers to a set of interconnected human rights and laws. As an essential right, access to justice guarantees that everyone is treated equally under the law. It allows people to defend their rights and requires governments to ensure that individuals can take legal action or receive effective remedies when needed. Ensuring access to justice is vital for maintaining the rule of law, and it is the responsibility of the police, other law enforcement agencies, and legal institutions to uphold this principle.

For sex workers, access to justice means being able to seek and receive fair treatment and protection under the law without fear of stigmatisation, discrimination, or legal repercussions. Access to justice also includes the ability to challenge unjust laws and policies, participate in legal proceedings, and have equal access to legal representation.

Access to justice involves three key elements:

1. **Barriers to access:** Does the individual have the ability to seek justice? Factors like financial constraints, language barriers, or particular locations can all create obstacles. Mistreatment by police and law enforcement can also constitute a barrier to accessing justice.

2. **A just system:** Is the justice system fair? When interacting with the justice system, individuals should not face discrimination based on factors like race, migration status, gender, their work, or disability.
3. **Outcomes:** Was justice achieved? Did the individual receive a fair remedy or solution?

Who can access justice often depends on a person's background and identity. Access to justice has historically been influenced by gender, race, disability, class, and sexual identity (Backhouse, 2005: 126). For marginalised groups like sex workers these barriers are even greater. Research shows that sex workers face serious disadvantages at every stage of the justice process, whether as victims, witnesses, or offenders (NSWP, 2020).

LEGAL MODELS OF SEX WORK

The legal frameworks in which sex workers operate are a significant factor in determining their safety, well-being, and risks associated with work, including violence (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024; Platt *et al.*, 2018). Laws and policies also dictate law enforcement strategies and forms of policing to which sex workers are subjected and that, in turn, impact their access to justice as victims of crime and when accused of breaking the law.

There are various legal models functioning in the 11 countries under study. To facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data, we categorised the legal frameworks surrounding sex work in these countries into three main groups: criminalisation, regulation, and decriminalisation.[3] Additionally, we identified three sub-categories within criminalisation to reflect the different legal models based on which parties are targeted. Legal models under which sex workers are penalised and third parties are criminalised were categorised as 'criminalisation'. Legal models under which sex workers are neither criminalised nor penalised but third parties are criminalised were categorised as 'partial criminalisation'. Finally, legal models under which both clients of sex workers and third parties are criminalised were categorised as 'Swedish model'.

The table below classifies the countries under study in accordance with these categories and outlines the legal status of sex work and related activities within each legal context.[4]

As shown in the table, the legal models of Armenia and North Macedonia were categorised as 'criminalisation'; those of France and Sweden as 'Swedish model'; and those of Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom as 'partial criminalisation'. Greece, the Netherlands, and Switzerland were categorised as 'regulation'. Together with Belgium, the latter formed the largest group of countries under study. Although Belgium introduced the decriminalisation of sex work in June 2022, the Belgian approach to decriminalisation was at a very early stage, awaiting the formulation and adoption of the royal decrees that would lay down the practical aspects of

3 While there are other ways to categorise the different legislative models that impact sex workers, in this report we follow Oliveira *et al.* (2020, 2023).

4 In laws affecting sex workers, sex work is often referred to as 'prostitution', which we will use in this report when referring to specific legal codes that impact consenting adult sex workers.

the decriminalisation policy. Hence, it may not yet have a significant impact on policing or the lived experiences of sex workers. Additionally, many sex workers' testimonies focus on past interactions with police and access to justice. Therefore, for the purposes of our analysis, we have grouped Belgium with the countries whose legal medals we categorised as 'regulation'.

TABLE 1: LEGAL MODELS OF SEX WORK

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">Criminalisation</th><th>Regulation</th><th>Decriminalisation</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Sex work is criminalised.

Criminalisation aims to end prostitution, through prosecuting sex workers, their clients, or third parties. Sex workers are criminalised and experience other forms of legal sanctions.</td><td>Sex work is not criminalised but regulated and controlled by the state.

Regulation considers sex work to be an economic activity that must be regulated through sex work-specific laws, which might criminalise some aspects of sex work while permitting others. Sex work regulations are often vague and very restrictive, thereby greatly reducing the ability to work legally.</td><td>Sex work is not criminalised.

All criminal sanctions around sex work are removed. Sanctions will still apply to those with irregular migration status.</td></tr>
<tr><th>Criminalisation</th><th>Swedish model</th><th>Partial criminalisation</th><th>Regulation</th><th>Decriminalisation</th></tr>
<tr><td>Selling sex is an administrative offence and third parties are criminalised.

North Macedonia, Armenia</td><td>Selling sex is not directly criminalised but clients and third parties are criminalised.

Sweden, France</td><td>Selling sex is not directly criminalised but third parties are criminalised.

Poland, Spain, UK</td><td>Greece, the Netherlands, Switzerland</td><td>Belgium</td></tr>
</table>

The section 'Country profiles: Legal models of sex work' in the Appendix to this report provides more detailed information on sex work policies, relevant laws, and law enforcement strategies in all countries under study.

REPORT OUTLINE

The findings in this report are ordered as follows: we first explore the contexts in which sex workers come into contact with the police. We then discuss sex workers' attitudes towards the police. In the following sections we document sex workers' experiences with the police. The section 'Police violence and repression' documents the different forms of repression, corruption, violence, and discrimination by the police to which sex workers are subjected. The section also explores sex workers' experiences with on- and off-duty police in the role of clients. The section 'Positive treatment by the police' focuses on sex workers' positive experiences in contact with the police. We then focus on research participants' experiences when they had been arrested, detained, or taken to the police station. After these findings we discuss their contact with police as victims of crime. The section 'What do sex workers want?' discusses participants' opinions on factors that could improve their safety and access to justice. In the concluding part we summarise the data and question the role and impact of policing on sex workers' access to justice.

In the Appendix section of this report we enclose more in-depth information on sex work policies in all countries under study, tables, and references.

Content note

In dealing with the relationship between sex workers and the police, this report contains accounts of discrimination, harassment, and violence, which may be unsettling to the reader. We have elected to include the quotes from interviews not for the sake of morbid curiosity or to sensationalise participants' experiences, but because they are crucial to highlight the realities – often violent, often shocking – of what happens during sex workers' encounters with the police. The quotes contained herein are not gratuitous, and they are shared as empirical evidence to illustrate our findings. A content note is needed, however, as this report includes details of violence, often directly sexual if not sexualised, and often extreme.

METHODOLOGY

This report was prepared by the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance in cooperation with 13 national partner organisations from 11 European countries. It follows the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) framework and draws on in-depth interviews with sex workers as well as expert knowledge of sex worker-led organisations across the region.

In the following section we lay out our research approach, explain the research process, provide information on data collection and analysis, and present the demographic profile of research participants. We later briefly discuss strengths and limitations of this research project and provide a short explanatory note on the way in which research results are being presented in this report.

FPAR METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH FOR CHANGE

Sex workers have been consistently misportrayed and negatively affected by research that does not take into account their voices and the complexities of their lives. Methodologically unsound, unethical, and extractivist research has been used to justify ideologically-driven policy decisions that render sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and violence (Dewey & Zheng 2013; Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Sanders & Hardy 2014; Van der Meulen 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2022). This research offers an alternative to harmful and 'top-down' studies 'on' sex workers, by following principles of Feminist Participatory Action Research. FPAR is a community-based research strategy that aims at bringing structural changes with the potential to enhance access to rights for marginalised communities. Oriented at change and ending different forms of oppression, FPAR intentionally and actively involves people and groups who are most affected by the research, recognising that it is the very members of the communities who are the experts on their lives and needs. It is also grounded in feminist ethics of care, responsibility, and solidarity, and prioritises safety, well-being, and empowerment of communities participating in the research process (Maguire, 1987; Reid & Frisby, 2008). As such, FPAR allows us to produce viable, ethically rigorous research that supports sex workers in their fight for human rights and social change.

Building on FPAR, this project put sex workers' expertise, experiences, and demands at the centre of the research process and engaged sex workers throughout the "key phases of knowledge production" (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014: 53). Sex workers and community-led organisations were involved at all stages of the research process, including defining this project's goals, designing the research methodology, collecting data, and analysing the findings presented in this report.

ACCESSING JUSTICE: RESEARCH PROCESS

The project was launched in 2022 in response to sex workers' calls for research looking into experiences with policing and access to justice for sex workers across Europe. ESWA member organisations were invited to take part in this research, both as experts and researchers. Thirteen organisations from 11 countries got involved in the project, 10 of which were sex worker-led.

In the project's preparatory phase during the first half of 2022, partner organisations participated in online project meetings aimed at collectively specifying research objectives and strategies, and sharing experiences in community-based evidence collection. Those meetings were followed by an in-person three-day training during which peer researchers from partner organisations learnt and developed research skills necessary to engage in the data collection process. Additionally, ESWA hosted two in-depth focus groups with 15 researchers and sex workers, who had previously participated in other community projects, to establish best practices that informed the project's approach.

In the data collection phase, which lasted from mid-2022 to 2023, each organisation produced a desk-based report about the relationship between sex workers and other marginalised communities and the police in their country. Each partner organisation recruited and interviewed sex workers who had direct contact with the police; the vast majority of these interviews were conducted by peer researchers (sex workers).

In order to provide continued support to partner organisations involved in data collection, both project coordinators and interviewers had access to an ESWA-managed cloud drive containing a large collection of research materials and resources. Throughout the duration of the project, ESWA's Research Officer ran bi-weekly online drop-in sessions and managed an online group chat, in which members of each organisation could seek assistance and support from their peers.

Partner organisations also collaborated on data analysis by corroborating or highlighting inconsistencies within initial research findings throughout 2023, as well as on the interpretation of findings in the report's initial draft in the first half of 2024.

From its inception, execution, and analysis to its publication and dissemination, sex workers were central to ESWA's research project. The project was sex worker-led:

- → The majority of the ESWA team are sex workers.
- → Ten out of 13 of ESWA's partner organisations who conducted peer interviews are sex-worker led.
- → More than 75% of interviews during the data collection phase were conducted by sex workers.
- → Fourteen individuals from eight partner organisations attended an in-person three-day training in Brussels, in which they learnt and developed their key research skills.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

With the aim to explore the impact of law enforcement on sex workers' access to justice across the European region, and to capture the diversity of sex workers' experiences with the police, we chose semi-structured in-depth interviews as our key research tool. The interview guide was developed together with partner organisations to ensure its accuracy and relevance in all research contexts, and then translated into the necessary languages.

This research adopted a purposive sampling strategy, aiming to gather 20 interviews in each country under study. To participate in the research, individuals had to meet the following criteria: they had to be current or former sex workers, over 18 years of age, have work experience in one of the countries being studied, and have experience of direct contact with the police. For the purposes of this research, we defined 'direct contact' as any interaction with the police, whether as a victim, witness, or accused party; during a police inspection, raid, or 'welfare check'; with police officers posing or visiting as clients; or any other form of experience with members of the police force at any level. Additionally, in order to reflect the diversity of sex workers' lived realities and working conditions, the participants in each country were chosen to represent, as closely as possible, the makeup of the local sex work community, including workers from various sectors of the industry and across different settings and working arrangements. Given the extensive research pointing to the over-policing of the most vulnerable communities (Fekete, 2022; Freitas, 2016; London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine [LSHTM], 2018; Williams & Kind, 2019), we also sought to ensure that participants in each country included sex workers from marginalised or multiply marginalised communities, such as migrant and racialised sex workers, transgender and gender non-conforming sex workers, and sex workers who use drugs. Additionally, we aimed to capture the experiences of sex workers who are frequently invisibilised, including cis and trans men selling sex (Raine, 2021).

Following those sampling guidelines, all partner organisations recruited participants in their local contexts through their networks, communities, and support and outreach services, as well as social media and other communication channels. In the pilot phase of this process, 30 interviews were conducted in 10 countries to assess the relevance and improve the interview guide. Subsequently, the remaining interviews were conducted by trained peer researchers, with the exception of those in Belgium and Switzerland, where the majority were conducted by non-sex workers.[5] Research participation was voluntary and based on informed consent that could be revoked at any time. To ensure anonymity, identifying data were not collected; participants were invited to provide pseudonyms for use in publications. All research participants received an honorarium as remuneration for their time and contribution to this research project.

The number of participants across all countries was 203, which represents a huge success, when considering the criminalised and precarious situations in which many sex workers as well as member organisations are working. We were unable to use four of the interviews from Belgium due to audio problems and inconsistencies with our sample criteria. Thus, a total of 199 interviews were analysed for this report. All organisations interviewed 20 sex workers, except

5 ESWA accepted these conditions because it was considered more important for these countries to be included in the research than to strictly adhere to the project's peer-researcher element.

for the two groups in the Netherlands (14 interviews) and Sweden (9 interviews). The interviews were conducted in 11 different languages: Armenian, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, Greek, Macedonian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish.

The majority of interviews were recorded. When interviews were not recorded, the interviewer noted participants' answers and shared them with ESWA. Some interviews were also transcribed internally, and the transcripts sent to ESWA. Other interview transcripts were translated into English by a mix of community volunteers and professional translation companies. Where interviews contained context-specific terms or slang, they were clarified by the respective partner organisations.

The interview transcripts were analysed both quantitatively and quantitatively. To provide a statistical insight into the data, all interview transcripts were analysed using spreadsheet-database hybrid software Airtable. Sex workers' testimonies were also analysed qualitatively by way of thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021) with the application of qualitative data analysis software NVivo 14 and MAXQDA 24. This allowed us to organise the data via themes and to identify similarities and differences across all interviews.

A thorough analysis was conducted of both desk-based research, provided by all partner organisations, and secondary sources, including academic and grey literature.

RESEARCH STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

STRENGTHS

Following the FPAR approach, this research was sex worker-led, putting into practice one of the core principles among sex workers' rights movements: "Nothing about us without us." The continued engagement of partner organisations in the research process allowed us to collect testimonies from around 200 sex workers in Europe, which represent a very large group for a research project adopting qualitative interviews. This enabled us to gather sound and rich evidence across different countries and increased our capacity to document patterns, similarities, and differences in how police interacted with sex workers, and how sex workers' access to justice differed across diverse legal frameworks and forms of sex work. Additionally, by adopting an intersectional lens to analyse the policing of sex workers, this research allowed us to capture diverse experiences of different sex worker communities, including those multiply marginalised and historically over-policed, namely migrants, transgender sex workers, or sex workers who use drugs. We hope that FPAR and intersectional approaches can be replicated within research on sex workers' lived realities both within and outside of academic settings.

Peer interviewing, i.e. sex workers interviewing sex workers, has proven to be a successful data collection method (Bowen & O'Doherty, 2014; O'Neill, 2010; Devotta *et al.*, 2016), especially when such sensitive topics as policing and police repression are under study. Since sex workers often distrust researchers (Agustín, 2004; Van der Meulen, 2011), and due to "the potential for exploitation and lack of respect for participants by research teams" (Goldenberg *et al.*,

2016: 3), peer interviews are an effective method to alleviate such concerns and allow peer researchers to collect accurate data about sensitive subjects, such as sex workers' experience of policing. Moreover, entering into a discussion with criminalised groups about the police can create understandable fears about how, and by whom, their information will be used, especially when the nature of the research may involve the identification of harms perpetrated by the police. Peer research that is conducted by organisations who are not affiliated with any police institutions, and work to improve the human rights of sex workers, can go some way to mitigate fears about the police. Being interviewed by a sex worker – someone who has similar experiences and a similar positionality – can work towards neutralising any lingering power imbalances in the researcher-participant dynamic. Knowing the researcher was a sex worker themselves was critical in ensuring the participants felt safe, that their participation was fully confidential, and that they would not be judged for whatever they chose to disclose.

LIMITATIONS

The findings presented in this research draw on both qualitative and quantitative analyses of in-depth interviews with participants. Although a total of 199 interviews constitutes a robust sample size, allowing for quantification of data, the use of purposive rather than probabilistic sampling limits our ability to make generalisable claims or statistical inferences about the entire sex worker population in Europe. Moreover, even the remarkable inclusion of up to 20 participants at the national level cannot be considered representative of each country's sex worker population, and thus does not yield generalisable results at that level. Similarly, given the non-probabilistic sampling approach and variations in sample size and composition in different countries under study, a comparative analysis of sex workers' experiences with the police across legal contexts or demographic categories (such as migration status, sexuality, gender, and forms of work and work settings) should be interpreted with caution. As a result, rather than offering broad or country-specific generalisations or statistically rigid comparative analysis, this report highlights significant trends in sex workers' experiences of law enforcement strategies across the European region. It also provides nuanced insights – both quantified and qualified – into how police interact with sex workers, taking into account differences in legal settings and participants' demographic profiles. Additionally, while not representative, our sample reflects, as closely as possible, the makeup of each country's sex worker community and the diversity of sex worker communities in Europe.

In terms of data collection, we practiced data minimisation and did not collect information regarding age, parental status, disability status, or other demographic markers such as a participants' time in sex work. This would be useful data to collect in future projects to expand our understanding of how different factors can alter the relationship between sex workers and police. We also acknowledge that experiences of men selling sex (both cis and trans) were underrepresented in our research, and we hope for more research focused on their interactions with the police.

The research project was Anglo-centric in its scope and delivery. Involvement in the project required at least two (peer) researchers from each partner organisation to speak English, and all resources were produced in English. ESWA made the conscious decision to allocate funds to deliver in-person training, instead of using them to translate all research resources into other languages. It would be advantageous if future research was made more accessible by providing multiple language versions.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

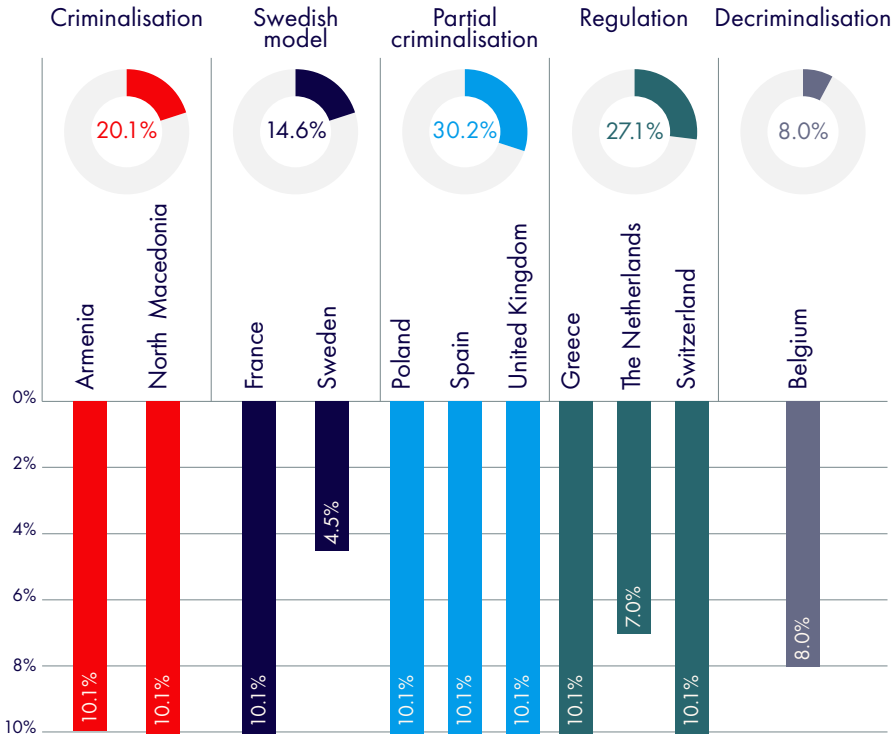
A total of 203 sex workers participated in our research, with the accounts of 199 analysed in this report. Below we present demographic characteristics of our research participants.

PARTICIPANTS BY LEGAL MODEL AND COUNTRY

Our research builds on testimonies of sex workers working in 11 different countries across Europe. Most of the national samples, i.e. those in Armenia, France, Greece, North Macedonia, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK, consisted of 20 participants, making up for around 80% of all sex workers who took part in the study. Sixteen participants (8% of the research sample) were based in Belgium, 14 in the Netherlands (7%), and 9 in Sweden (4.5%).

Participants were also grouped based on the legal frameworks adopted in the respective European countries under study. (The categorisation of legal models used in this research is discussed in more detail on pages 13-14.) Out of 199 research participants, 20.1% worked under criminalisation (in Armenia and North Macedonia) and 27.1% under regulation (Greece, the Netherlands, and Switzerland). At 30.2%, the greatest number of participants operated under partial criminalisation (in Poland, Spain, and the UK), whereas sex workers working under the Swedish model (in France and Sweden) constituted 14.6% of our sample. 8% of participants worked under decriminalisation (in Belgium).

FIGURE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY LEGAL MODEL



FORMS AND FREQUENCY OF SEX WORK

TYPES OF SEX WORK

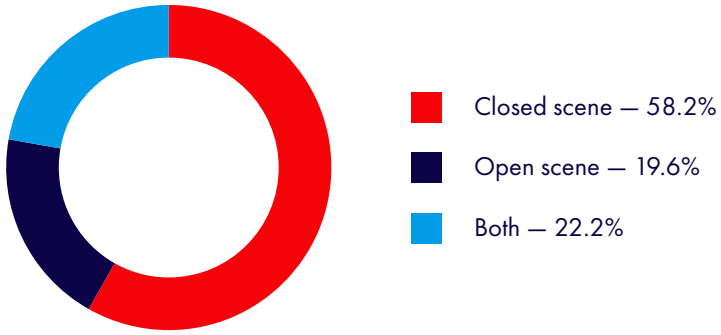
The criminalised and often invisibilised nature of sex work makes it extremely difficult to capture accurate statistics about the types of sex work in which people engage, as well as the frequency with which they engage in it. Our participants referred to over 17 different forms of sex work. This indicates the variety of the industry and points to the flexibility which it affords many workers (Maher *et al.*, 2012). Participants moved in and out of different forms of sex work depending on their financial needs, social privileges afforded to them, or other factors such as personal preferences. Some forms of sex work were present in all countries, like open scene full-service work. Others were more country-specific, such as erotic theatres in France.

> **I've done street work, I've worked in a parlour, I've worked as an escort. I've done a lot.**
>
> Susan, UK

Full-service, indoor (closed scene) work was undertaken by 154 participants, the largest category in our research.[6] 82 participants had engaged in open scene full-service work, which includes both independent and managed street-based work,[7] as well as car meets. Online work was cited by 42 participants as being part of the sex work in which they engaged.[8] Fifteen participants had engaged in BDSM services, 10 in stripping, and 11 in other forms of sex work (such as erotic performance, porn, phone sex, erotic massage, or window boxes).

Out of 189 participants who worked in person with their clients and engaged in full-service work, 58.2% had only worked indoors. 19.6% had only worked in the open scene, and 22.2% had worked both indoors and outdoors.

FIGURE 2: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY SEX WORK SETTING

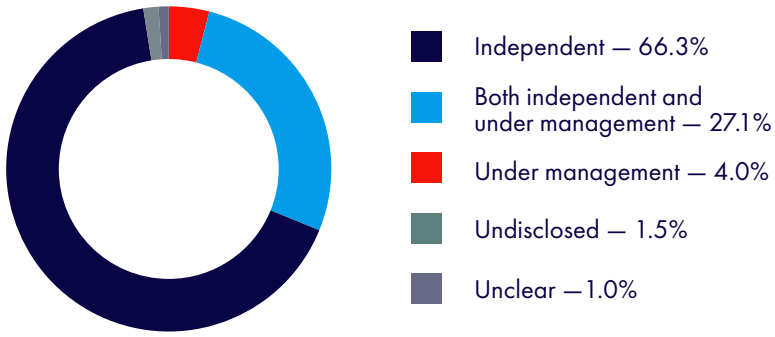


6 Not further specified full-service sex work was quoted by 7 respondents.
7 This includes independent indoor work, third party indoor work, working in brothels and established venues, and providing BDSM services.
8 This does not include internet-mediated full-service work (i.e. those who advertise their full-service work online and see clients in person). The online sex work category is made up of services such as phone sex and camming.

INDEPENDENT OR MANAGED

132 participants had only worked independently,[9] making up 66.3% of our total data set. Eight participants (4%) had worked solely under management, while 54 (27.1%) had worked both independently and with a third party. Three (1.5%) did not disclose whether their work had been conducted independently or through a third party, and the responses of 2 participants (1%) were unclear.

FIGURE 3: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY WORKING ARRANGEMENT



FREQUENCY OF SEX WORK

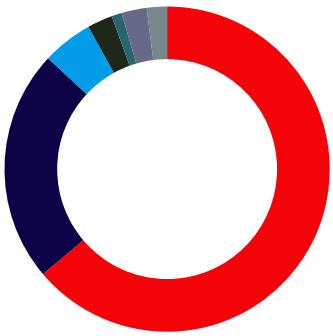
51.3% of participants had engaged in sex work on a regular, full-time basis, whereas 23.6% had only worked on an occasional, part-time basis. 14.6% had experience of working both full- and part-time. 15 participants did not disclose the frequency of their work, and six selected 'Other' when asked if they engaged in sex work occasionally or full-time. Two further respondents had already retired.

PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The entire sample was made up of 63.8% cis women (a total of 127 participants), 23.1% trans women (46), 5% cis men (10), 2.5% non-binary participants (5), and 1% of trans men (2). Five selected a gender identity other than the aforementioned options (2.5%). A further 4 participants chose not to disclose their gender identity during the interviews, or their answers were indiscernible when analysing the interview transcripts (2%). Our sample reflects a bias towards capturing the experiences of women (both cis and trans). While sex work is a gendered form of labour, with women being the majority of those who engage in it, more research is needed to highlight the frequently invisibilised experiences of men (both cis and trans) as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming people.

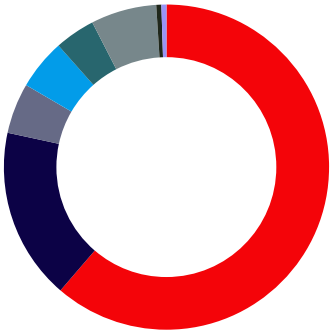
9 This included working in collectives with colleagues, which we understand to be different from working under management due to the lower risk of exploitation compared to management.

FIGURE 4: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER



The various sexualities of participants are mentioned in the table below. At 61.3%, the largest percentage in our sample was made up of heterosexual participants (122 participants out of 195 asked), and the smallest percentages were of asexual and lesbian participants (one each).

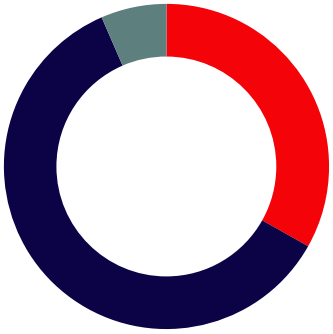
FIGURE 5: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY SEXUALITY



PARTICIPANTS BY MIGRATION AND RESIDENCY STATUS

Sixty-six participants (33.2%) identified as migrants to the country in which the interview took place. 120 were not migrants (60.3% of the total) and 13 participants (6.5%) did not disclose their migration status.

FIGURE 6: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY MIGRATION STATUS



There was great variation in participants' residency status in the countries in which the interviews took place. 120 participants were citizens of the country in which the interview took place; 30 had residence permits, including 8 with long-term residency status; and 12 were EU nationals living in other EU member states. Two respondents held short-term visas, 12 were undocumented, and 8 were refugees or seeking asylum. Twelve sex workers participating in the study did not disclose their residency status.

While the research was based on sex workers' experiences of police in 11 countries, participants had lived and worked in altogether 53 countries, which represents almost a quarter of the world. This echoes research and work on migration that understands sex work to be a form of work which is more readily accessible to migrants, particularly to both cis and trans migrant women (Agustín, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2007).

DATA PRESENTATION: EXPLANATORY NOTE

Where research participants' answers are quoted in this report, the original phrasing in the transcripts was retained as accurately as possible. Edits were only made for conciseness and readability, or to add words or phrases necessary for clarity. Pauses and omissions are indicated by ellipses [...], while any clarifications or additions for syntactical purposes are enclosed in brackets [].

Responses to selected interview questions are presented as percentage distributions of the respective responses. It is important to note that the number of participants who responded to each question varied. Our analyses are based on the respective subsets of participants who answered specific questions, rather than on the total number of participants. Accordingly, all statistical data is accompanied by an n-value, which indicates the number of participants who responded to a given question.

In addition to presenting the percentage distribution of participants' responses to specific interview questions, the report also provides an analysis of how these responses vary based on several factors, including the legal frameworks surrounding sex work, the sex work settings and working arrangements in which participants were engaged, as well as their migration status, sexuality, and gender.

The table below outlines how the data has been grouped and analysed across these demographic markers and legislative contexts. It can also serve as an explanatory tool to assist in interpreting the tables included in the Appendix of this report.

TABLE 2: EXPLANATORY TABLE

Interview question		% of recorded incidents
Overall for participants		**Here you will find the percentage of all participants who answered the respective interview questions; an n-value will also be provided.**
Legal models and demographic markers		Below you will find the percentage of participants who answered these interview questions, broken down by demographic markers and legislative frameworks. Here we analyse the data only for those participants who provided us with information on their demographic characteristics.
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	Data for participants working in criminalised settings (Armenia and North Macedonia); 40 participants.
	Swedish model	Data for participants working under the Swedish model (France and Sweden); 29 participants.
	Partial criminalisation	Data for participants working in partially criminalised contexts (Poland, Spain, and the UK); 60 participants.
	Regulation	Data for participants working in regulated contexts (Belgium, Greece, the Netherlands, and Switzerland); 70 participants.
Work setting	Open scene	Data for participants engaged in in-person full-service work with clients, providing their services exclusively outdoors; 37 participants.
	Closed scene	Data for participants engaged in in-person full-service work with clients, providing their services exclusively indoors; 110 participants.
	Both	Data for participants engaged in in-person full-service work with clients, providing their services both outdoors and indoors; 42 participants.
Working arrangement	Independent	Data for participants who worked independently exclusively; 132 participants.
	Under management or both	Data for participants who worked exclusively under management or both under management and independently. Data for these participants have been combined due to the small number of participants who worked exclusively under management (8 participants), which was insufficient for separate analysis; 62 participants.
Gender identity	Cis women	Data for participants who self-identify as cis women; 127 participants.
	Trans women	Data for participants who self-identify as trans women; 46 participants.
	Cis men	Data for participants who self-identify as cis men; 10 participants.
	Trans men, non-binary, other	Data for participants who self-identify as trans men, non-binary individuals, or other gender non-conforming identities. These groups were combined due to the small size of each sub-sample; 11 participants.
Sexuality	Heterosexual	Data for participants who self-identify as heterosexual; 122 participants.
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	Data for participants who self-identify as gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, or other. These groups were combined due to the small size of each sub-sample; 68 participants.
Migration status	Migrants	Data for participants who are migrants; 60 participants.
	Non-migrants	Data for participants who are not migrants; 122 participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

INTERACTIONS WITH THE POLICE

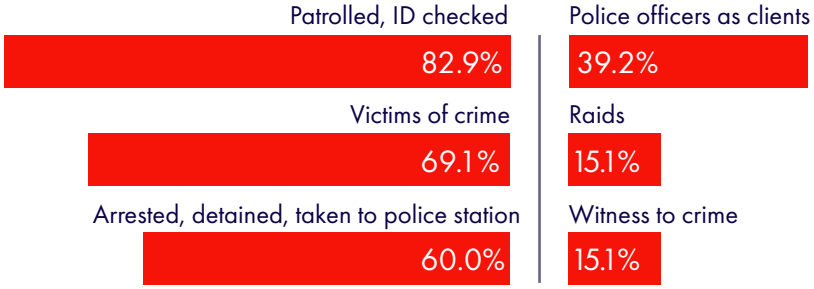
CONTEXTS IN WHICH SEX WORKERS COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE POLICE

Police surveillance is a daily reality for many sex workers in Europe. The policing of sex workers involves systematic patrolling, identity checks and stop-and-frisk interventions, police raids and sting operations, or crackdowns on sex work venues. All of the sex workers interviewed engaged in some form of interaction with the police. As much as 82.9% of participants interacted with police during routine patrolling as well as identity and residency checks.[10] This indicates very high levels of policing, surveillance, and profiling to which sex workers are subjected, including gender and racial profiling, especially targeting migrant, trans, and racialised sex workers, and those working in the open scene.

69.1% of participants came into contact with the police as victims of crime, i.e. while seeking help or reporting violence to the police (n=188). The other most prevalent circumstances of encountering police were related to being arrested, detained, or taken to the police station; such instances were reported by 60% (n=195). 15.1% of participants, respectively, interacted with the police during raids, including anti-trafficking raids and sting operations, and as witnesses to a crime (n=199).[11]

Aside from these types of police contact, participants also noted that police officers were often clients of theirs, which will be explored in further detail later on in this report. 78 out of 199 participants mentioned coming into contact with police in a sexual context: either meeting off-duty officers as clients; being coerced to perform sexual services against their will; being blackmailed to return money after the fact; or encountering plainclothes officers posing as clients as part of entrapments.[12] This is an important finding, as it demonstrates the hypocrisy with which police treat sex workers and indicates how criminalisation renders sex workers vulnerable to sexualised violence, not just at the hands of violent clients but also on the part of the police.

FIGURE 7: CONTEXTS IN WHICH SEX WORKERS ENCOUNTER POLICE



10 While participants were not asked directly about the prevalence of their interactions with the police in the context of routine policing and identity checks, we deducted this data from the type of police force with whom sex workers interacted.

11 Estimations concerning participants' interactions with the police as witnesses of crimes are also based on analyses of qualitative data.

12 Participants were not asked directly about their encounters with police officers as clients. Those estimates are based on our analysis of qualitative data.

TYPES OF POLICE FORCES INTERACTING WITH SEX WORKERS

We asked research participants about the types of police they had encountered in the past year and the frequency of those encounters. This information helped us gain better insights into the frequency and intensity in which sex workers are policed. The variety of law enforcement and police that sex workers encountered indicates the scale and diverse strategies of surveillance and policing that target sex workers and their venues.

TABLE 3: POLICE INTERACTIONS WITH SEX WORKERS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS

Police category	Overall number of research participants who had contact with police	Police types (and corresponding research participant contact)
General	155	• Patrol (18) • Local (79) • Met police [UK] (1) • Territorial (3) • Traffic (23) • General (96) • Prevention (2)
Criminal	124	• National police (9) • Anti-terrorism (1) • Organised crime (3) • Anti-trafficking (19) • Vice/morality (15) • Criminal (57) • Plain clothes (58) • Raid (11) • Gendarmerie [France] (1) • Civil guard [Spain] (3) • Ertzaintza [Basque] (1)
Immigration	32	
Other	8	• Other [unspecified] (4) • Four sex workers were not sure with what kind of police unit they had interacted.

Many participants also had contact with border and prison guards as well as detention officers. Though not police officers, they were included in our analysis due to their relevance in monitoring and policing sex workers' movements and activities. Participants often perceived every state actor they encountered, including these non-police officers, as either enforcers of the law or punishers.

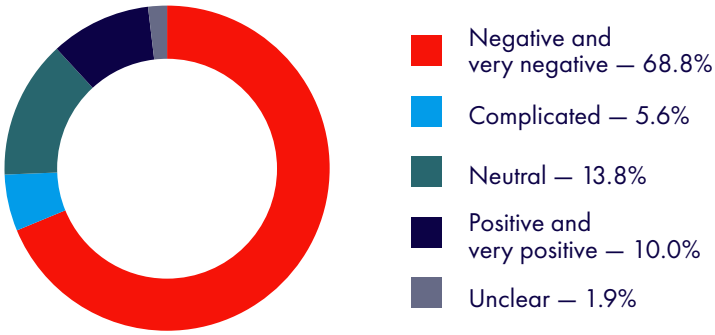
SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCES WITH AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE POLICE

In this section we provide an overview of sex workers' attitudes towards the police, including their opinions towards law enforcement and their experiences with policing.

HOW DO SEX WORKERS FEEL ABOUT THE POLICE?

Given the diverse socio-economic backgrounds and policing cultures of the countries involved in this research, it was important to get an overall idea of sex workers' attitudes towards the police in their respective countries of residence. To that end, we asked research participants about their feelings towards the police. Notably, *negative* and *very negative* feelings dominated the responses (37.5% and 31.3%, respectively). Out of 160 participants asked, 13.8% had a neutral opinion about the police, while 6.3% expressed positive sentiments. 5.6% described their feelings about the police as complicated, while 3.7% reported very positive views. 1.9% of the answers to this question were unclear.

FIGURE 8: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE POLICE



Overall, the analysis revealed that individual participants' feelings towards the police were mostly negative and very negative.

Additionally, sex workers working under partial criminalisation and the Swedish model had more negative attitudes towards the police – with the percentages at 78.9% and 72.2%, respectively – than those working under regulation (61.5%) and criminalisation (60.6%).

Sex workers with experience of working under management had a more negative attitude towards police than those working independently (83.6% and 61.8%, respectively); this can be attributed to the adverse effects of criminalisation that targets managed and collective workplaces.

Very negative and negative attitudes towards the police were also more prevalent among non-migrant sex workers than migrant sex workers (74.5% and 61.8%), and when comparing trans and cis women (68.6% and 66.7%) as well as queer and heterosexual participants (77.4% and 65.7%). All cis men in our participant group expressed negative and very

negative sentiments towards police. 71.4% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants shared negative and very negative sentiments towards police. Those trends reflect the role that racism, xenophobia, transphobia, and homophobia play in shaping sex workers' interactions with the police, as elaborated below.

→ **SEE TABLE 6 IN THE APPENDIX.**

REASONS BEHIND SEX WORKERS' BAD EXPERIENCES WITH THE POLICE

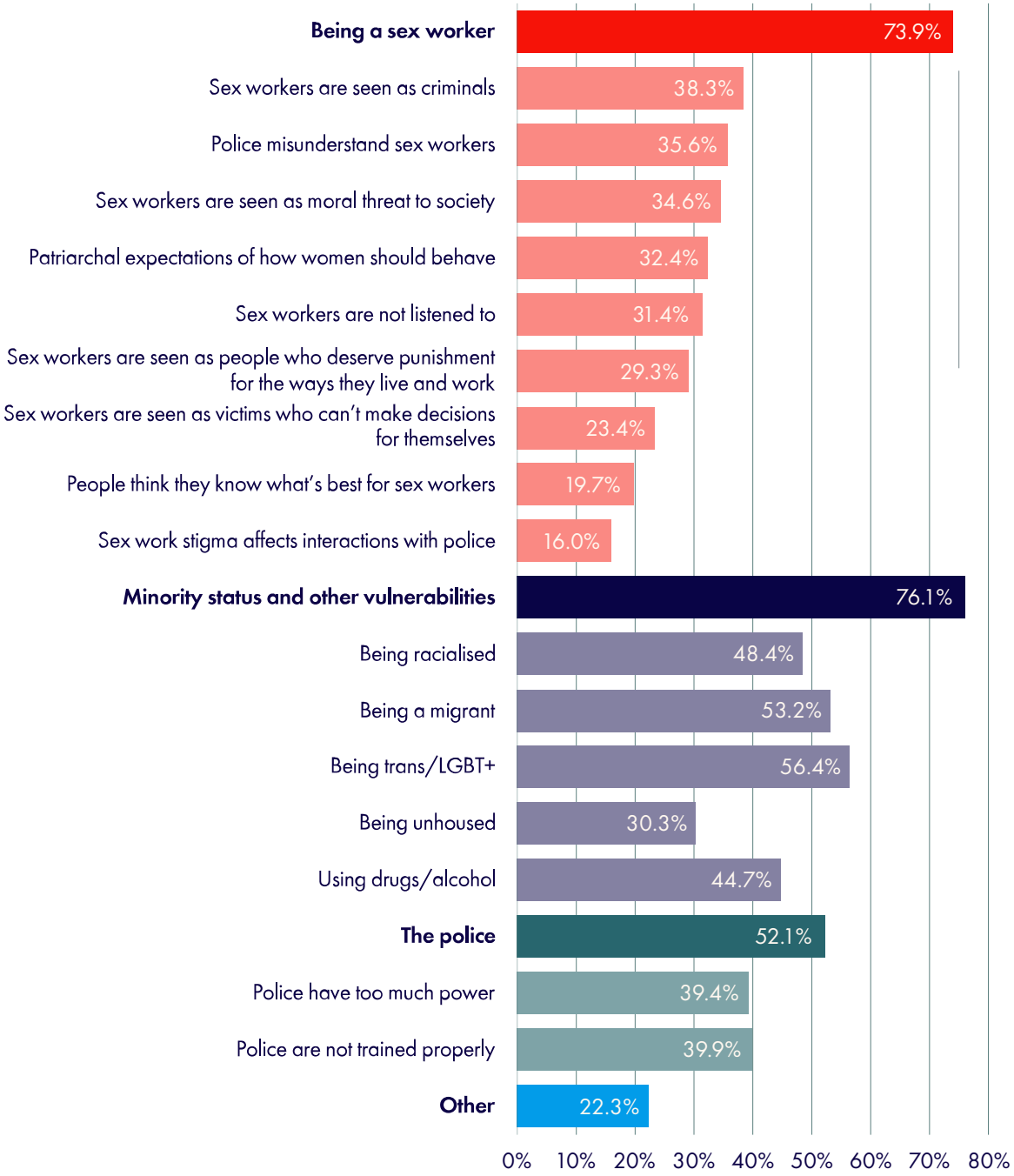
In this research, we also included participants' thoughts about why sex workers might have negative experiences with the police. During interviews, participants were asked an open-ended question: "What do you think are some of the factors that lead to someone having experiences of bad policing?" Their answers were analysed and grouped thematically, resulting in the following list of key factors that, in their view, shape sex workers' interactions with the police. Understanding these factors is of crucial importance as they powerfully illustrate sex workers' firm grasp of broader social power dynamics that directly shape how police officers interact with specific groups.

According to 73.9% out of the 188 participants asked, the legal status of sex work and harmful perceptions of sex workers are key reasons behind bad policing. 38.3% expressed that sex workers were treated as criminals and therefore believed to deserve harsh treatment from the police. 35.6% pointed towards police not understanding sex workers' needs, circumstances, or working conditions as a reason for negative outcomes of their interactions with the police. 34.6% of participants indicated that bad experiences of policing result from sex workers being seen as a moral threat to society, and 32.4% linked it with patriarchal and sexist norms concerning women's behaviour. For 31.4% of participants, experiences of bad policing result from sex workers not being listened to. 29.3% linked it with constructions of sex workers as people who deserve punishment for the ways in which they live and work, and 23.4% with sex workers being perceived as victims who cannot make decisions for themselves. Similarly, 19.7% of participants suggested that bad experiences of policing result from paternalistic attitudes of police and policymakers, who "think they know what's best for sex workers". 16% pointed directly towards the stigma attached to sex work as the factor adversely affecting sex workers' interactions with the police.

To sum up, the vast majority of sex workers participating in our research pointed towards harmful legal frameworks criminalising sex work as well as negative and discriminatory attitudes of police towards sex workers as detrimental factors in shaping their relations with police. In the view of participants, the criminalisation of sex work, the lack of recognition of sex workers' rights and humanity, and the prevalent stigmatisation pushes sex workers towards the margins of society and makes them easy targets for the police.

> **"As long as this profession isn't recognised, it is certain that the police can only ever be a source of oppression.**
>
> Shanelle, France

FIGURE 9: REASONS BEHIND SEX WORKERS' NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE



Participants also pointed towards other factors that negatively impact their experiences of policing. Over half of them (56.4%) saw being trans or queer as a factor exposing sex workers to negative experiences with the police. Again, over half of them (53.2%) suggested bad experiences of policing are linked with one's migration status. 48.4% indicated that sex workers being racialised is what exposes them to harsh policing. Additionally, 44.7% indicated drug or alcohol use and 30.3% being unhoused, respectively, as factors rendering sex workers more vulnerable to negative experiences with the police. Our participants' answers showed

that they perceived minority status; overlapping forms of stigmatisation and criminalisation (e.g. criminalisation of sex work, migration, or drug use); and various vulnerabilities, including addiction or housing insecurity, as important reasons behind bad experiences of policing.

The intersectional stigma and discrimination experienced by sex workers in the context of policing and in different encounters with law enforcement will be explored in greater detail in the section 'Stigmatisation and discrimination in policing'.

Finally, 52.1% of participants indicated that the root causes of sex workers' negative experiences with law enforcement are inherent to the nature of policing and the institution and structure of the police. 39.9% suggested that police officers are not properly trained (e.g. with respect to human rights or to recognise diversity). 39.4% indicated that the police have too much power and can get away with harmful behaviours and violence.

> **"And they also are power-hungry. So if they have power, they're going to use it no matter what you do. If they can trample all over you, they will. They may be bored with the paperwork and be lazy and let you go afterwards. But that's how I see them.**
>
> Bethany Rose, UK

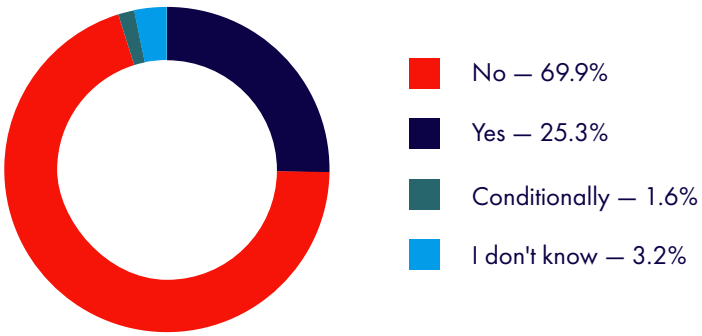
Additionally, 11 participants described the police as an inherently violent institution.

> **"The whole policing system is rotten.**
>
> Anastasia, Poland

POLICE CONCERN FOR SEX WORKERS' SAFETY

When asked if the police had ever been concerned for their safety, 69.9% of those asked (186 participants) believed they had not. 25.3% believed police were concerned for their safety. While 6 participants were unsure whether police were concerned for their safety, 3 considered their concern conditional.

FIGURE 10: POLICE CONCERN FOR SEX WORKERS' SAFETY



Both in criminalised and partially criminalised settings only 17.5% of participants asserted that police had ever been concerned for their safety. This conviction was more prevalent among sex workers working under regulation and the Swedish model, with 33.9% and 33.3%, respectively.

While 29.6% of sex workers working independently thought that police were concerned for their safety, this sentiment was shared by only 17.2% of those with experience of working under management. Variation was not great for sex workers depending on the work setting, with 27.8% of those working in the open scene, 25.5% of those working indoors, and 22.5% of those working both indoors and outdoors reporting that police showed concern for their safety.

Migrants and trans women more frequently expressed that police had shown concern for their safety, compared to their non-migrant and cis counterparts (33.3% to 22.4% and 30% to 24.4%, respectively). Only 8.3% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants felt that police were concerned for their safety. In turn, non-heterosexual participants less often suggested that police had ever shown concern for their safety, compared to their heterosexual counterparts (20.6% to 28.6%).

→ **SEE TABLE 7 IN THE APPENDIX.**

The vast majority of participants (130 or 69.9%) felt that police showed no concern for their safety. When elaborating on their answers, many expressed confusion or surprise at the lack of concern by the police, indicating sex workers' enduring association of police with risk and violence. Over 30 participants answered this question with an emphatic *no, never*, or *of course not*, expressing their frustration regarding the notion that police are a port of safety for sex workers. For some, it was so inconceivable that police would be concerned for their safety, that they found it laughable to think so.

> **Officially, that's what they say all the time. Each time, they say, "Ah, but we are here for your safety." So they claim to be there for my safety, but I don't see how they are making me feel safe. I feel unsafe in their presence.**
>
> Thierry, France

Similarly to Thierry, 14 participants indicated that rather than showing concern for their safety and providing protection, police officers were an active source of danger. This involved targeting sex workers with punitive interventions (including fines, detentions, or deportations); incriminating them; or exposing them to mistreatment, harassment, and abuse. Nine other participants felt that the police did not show any concern for them and were not interested in their well-being, safety, and protection. Notably, echoing Thierry's words, 7 participants suggested

that purported concern by police for sex workers' safety was used as a guise for punishment, including operations aiming to 'rescue' them from selling sex, or to target third parties presumed to be their traffickers or exploiters. Police interventions targeting sex workers under the guise of concern were particularly criticised by sex workers working under the Swedish model. Several sex workers also mentioned being put at risk of violence, harassment, and abuse, as well as economic precarity, after such police interventions.

Of the 47 participants who felt that police were concerned about their safety, 12 indicated that this involved a quick conversation or check-in. Such welfare checks involved police asking sex workers (mostly those working in the open scene) whether they were doing okay.

> **They stop and ask me if everything is fine, if I have any problems. All that happened, yes. Not every day, but it happens.**
>
> Rachelle, France

> **Five years ago a policeman came by and asked if I was okay. I don't think he was worried, I don't think he lost sleep over it. He just asked the typical question, but it was a behaviour that was unexpected to say the least. It was pleasant, though.**
>
> Mia, Greece

Similarly to Mia, many participants discussed the exceptional and surprising character of occasions when police expressed concern for their safety and well-being. This reveals the extent to which police mistreatment and a lack of consideration for sex workers is normalised, and illustrates participants' overwhelming expectation that police will treat them poorly. This type of sentiment was widespread in the data; the idea that police would show genuine concern for sex workers' safety was inconceivable for participants, even among those who had answered yes to this question.

Six participants mentioned police intervening after they had been harassed or attacked at work, and 4 indicated that police patrols or a non-combative police presence had at times deterred violent individuals.

> **I won't lie, sometimes yes, there were cases when there were some problems in the street, the police protected us to some extent. They stood by us at that moment so that they perpetrators would not approach or harm us, and other similar things.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

Five participants felt that police showed concern for their safety when following up on incidents or cases of violence they had reported beforehand. Four sex workers told us that they were given advice by police officers concerning their safety (e.g. not letting in dangerous clients, hiding money in a safe space to avoid being robbed, or installing cameras at their workplace) or provided with

the contact details of a police officer they could call in case of emergency. One participant from Armenia expressed that police in her location had shown genuine concern for her.

Through our research we also found that, when police *did* show concern, it was often conditional and not on sex workers' terms. Four participants expressed that police only showed concern (and behaved respectfully) when seeking to extract information from them, or when they believed that they were working under management they could target.

> **They have asked me if I wanted some protection. If I was thinking of quitting this industry and needed some special support and help. I said, "No, I will continue."**
>
> Angela, Sweden

> **One of those guys was kind of rude as well, but on this point, he was extremely okay and nice. He came to me and we sat down, and he said, "Please, if there is someone behind you, please tell us now, we can help you, you don't have to be afraid." This was actually the only moment he was kind with me.**
>
> Camilla, UK

> **The hotel called the police. They asked if I was working under someone else, you know, if I had a pimp. Basically, they almost checked my phone, but I refused. And not because I had a pimp, I just refused. I didn't want them to look into my phone. And yeah, that's the only time they were really concerned about me.**
>
> Ava, UK

Answers to this question reveal that, regardless of the legal setting and demographic markers, the majority of sex workers perceived police as unconcerned with their safety and well-being or described such concern as rare, performative, conditional, or even threatening. They also pointed out the negative impact that the very presence of police would mean for them. For these reasons, as shown below, many participants were unsure whether they could rely on the police as a source of safety when threatened with abuse or violence.

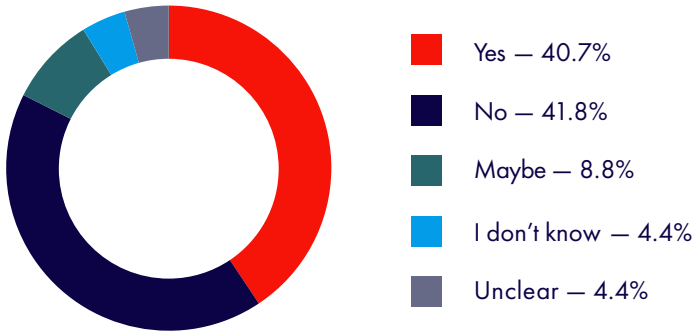
TO CALL OR NOT TO CALL? DECISION TO REACH OUT TO THE POLICE FOR SAFETY

> **The police force is the last place I would seek for truth, justice, or security.**
>
> Rosa, Poland

> **No, I will not contact the police to ensure my survival or the survival of my colleagues, insofar as, in my opinion, we are criminalised just for existing and for trying to survive by exercising our professional activity.**
>
> Beryl, France

In the course of our interviews, we asked participants whether they would turn to the police to keep themselves and their colleagues safe. Out of 182 participants asked, less than half (40.7%) said they would go to the police to keep themselves and colleagues safe. 13.2% were unsure whether they would contact police. The biggest group (41.8%) said they would not call the police even if their or their colleagues' safety was threatened.

FIGURE 11: WILLINGNESS OF SEX WORKERS TO APPROACH POLICE FOR SAFETY



The answers to this question differed significantly across legal contexts. Only 17.9% of participants working under the Swedish model said they would call the police when in danger. 40.4% of sex workers in partially criminalised contexts and 35.6% in regulated environments would call the police. Interestingly, as many as 65.8% of participants working in criminalised contexts were more likely to call the police – we will elaborate on their justifications later in this section.

Working arrangements also played a role, with independent sex workers much more likely to call the police for help than those with experience of working under management (47.9% to 27.6%).

There were also some variations depending on migration status, with migrant participants surprisingly more likely to call the police than non-migrants (46.8% to 36.6%). Similarly, a bigger proportion of trans than cis women said that they would call the police (51.3% to 39.3%). Cis men, on the one hand, and trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants, on the other, were even less likely to call the police for safety (20% and 25%, respectively). Finally, heterosexual participants were more likely to call the police than queer ones (46.6% to 27.4%).

→ **SEE TABLE 8 IN THE APPENDIX.**

While we did not ask about it specifically in the interviews, participants provided several reasons to explain why they would not go to the police to keep themselves and their colleagues safe. Fear of punishment was one of the most common reasons not to report violence or abuse. Twenty-five participants quoted risk of incrimination or other forms of punishment, including fines, arrests, heightened surveillance, losing custody of their kids, evictions, (public) outing, or deportations as the main motivations not to seek help from the police. Many of them suggested that the criminalisation of some aspects of sex work, as well as of migration, was a main barrier to reporting violence perpetrated against them to police, as it would put them in danger of being prosecuted or facing other negative outcomes.

> **Women are afraid to file a complaint or press charges when they are victims of an assault. It's because the police can have fun by making them lose their apartment.**
>
> Dingtang, France

> **I don't feel any kind of safety or any sense of security with this institution, so while I'm in danger, I would never think that my safe space could be a police department.**
>
> Nefeli, Greece

> **Never, because perhaps they will arrest us instead. Or they will not help you anyway or take it serious.**
>
> Mali, UK

Similarly to Mali, many sex workers feared police mistreatment upon reporting their victimisation or calling for help, such as not being taken seriously, not being believed, or experiencing discrimination, harassment, or violence at the hands of the police.

> **It would never occur to me to call the police about somebody's behaviour when it's overstepped the mark. It just wouldn't occur to me because I know you're fighting a losing battle before you start. It's not an option. It's gonna open up another can of worms. And again, you get judged.**
>
> Mandy, UK

Fourteen participants said that previous maltreatment from the police when reaching out for help was enough reason for them not to ever do it again.

> **Under no circumstances will I ever go again to the police.**
>
> Stella, Greece

> **I would never go to the police now to keep myself safe or my mates safe.**
>
> Jessica, UK

Police inaction and police corruption were also quoted by many participants as motivations not to file reports. Thirteen sex workers claimed that calling the police was a waste of time, as they did not show any concern for sex workers and their safety, and were unwilling to provide safety and protection for them. Several participants suggested that police officers were not interested in cases where sex workers were victimised and tended to side with violent clients or other perpetrators.

For numerous participants the level of fear and mistrust of the police was so high that they decided not to rely on the police as a source of safety or a first point of contact in case of emergency. Eleven participants claimed that rather than calling the police they would reach out to trusted community organisations or would only contact the police assisted by a representative of such organisations or a lawyer.

> **The police have never defended me. Why would I call them? It's more the associations that defend and guide you and protect you from the police. If there is something that involves me, that I am implicated in, I think I would call the association that supports me.**
>
> Carolina, Spain

> **No, I would rather go through an association first. Associations that protect and defend sex workers.**
>
> Mathéo, Belgium

Four other participants stated that they would call their colleagues and friends instead of the police. Many mentioned that they had to fend for themselves to safeguard their safety and protection at work.

Of the 74 participants who said that they would call the police and provided an explanation for their answer, the largest group (24) expressed that they did not have other options in case of emergency or would call the police in extremely urgent matters, such as when their lives or the lives of their friends would be under threat.

> **Because we have no other choice, unfortunately, between the plague and cholera.**
>
> Shanelle, France

> **What else can I do, where else can I go?**
>
> Lile, North Macedonia

Several participants said they would go to the police in a bid to keep their colleagues safe, but not for themselves. Four hoped that they might one day encounter a friendly and supportive police officer when in need of protection.

As already noted, participants working in criminalised contexts were much more inclined to turn to the police for safety than sex workers working in other legal settings. This was surprising, given the scale of police mistreatment, violence, and abuses to which sex workers in Armenia and North Macedonia, for instance, are subjected, which will be explored in detail in the following chapter. A more in-depth analysis of their explanations as to why would they reach out to police revealed that beyond the reasons listed above, six participants in criminalised contexts did so as a form of activism and self-advocacy, and to fight for recognition and access to rights. Several participants expressed that they felt entitled to protection by the police, both as human beings and sex workers, stating that it was the police's job to protect them. Others noted that by reporting crimes and abuses, they visibilised and documented the violence and harassment to which they are subjected by abusive clients, the general public, and police. Filing such reports was thus seen as a way of raising awareness about violence experienced by sex worker communities and demanding protection and police accountability.

> **Always, and I also insist to all my friends and fellow sex workers that whatever happens, they must go to the police station and report. Because as long as we keep silent, the clients, the public, and the police will continue to treat us as they do.**
>
> Lila, North Macedonia

> **We would turn to the police to demand our rights. In a way to ensure that we also have a purpose, we have rights, the right not to be harassed, especially not by the police.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

> **We are a targeted group in Armenia, and we all know that this is not accepted in Armenia. For example, I am ready for myself and for my friends to go write an application so that they take care of our safety. And not only for our safety, but also for all those people who are engaged in such work, who earn their living in this way.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

A sense of civic duty, a strategy to enhance knowledge and data about violations experienced by sex workers, building police capacity to assist sex workers, and a harm reduction strategy to prevent other sex workers from experiencing violence and abuse were also cited as reasons to report violence to the police by one participant from Poland.

> **What can they do to ensure our safety? Because it has been convincingly shown to me that it rather does not work that way. But I still believe that if we do not report these kinds of cases, they will not learn how to deal with them. Plus, the statistics will be more falsified and we will look like a very safe country because people are afraid to report crimes to the police. Also, for the safety of other sex workers.**
>
> Kamila, Poland

A NOTE ON FEAR

To frame the remainder of our analysis, it is necessary to highlight the pervasive landscape of fear in which sex workers live and work. Our findings indicate that fear is not only ubiquitous but grounded in reality. 65.3% of participants voiced fear of the police in some way (n=199).

> **My attitude towards police, first of all, is fear. Because I get very nervous when they are around. I don't want them asking me questions like your documents, things like that. And I don't know, I could say, I could say fear. Fear, fear, fear, fear. [laughs]**
>
> Eva, Switzerland

Fear was palpable throughout this project. Expressions of panic, hesitation, horror, terror, and distress regarding police were mentioned over 250 times across our interviews in 11 countries. Research participants offered many different reasons for why they were afraid of the police. Either they had experienced harm directly and were therefore afraid of further contact where they might experience more harm, or they had witnessed harm perpetrated by the police or known friends or colleagues who had experienced it. This undercurrent of fear affected how they interacted with clients; the criminal justice system; social support services (such as doctors, psychologists, or service providers); family, friends, and partners; and the police themselves.

The basis for this fear has been shown to have various reasons. Some participants mentioned that police contact might lead to being outed to friends and family. Most were afraid of experiencing discrimination by police officers, such as racism, transphobia (such as being misgendered, mocked, or ridiculed), or homophobia. Participants were also afraid of an excessive use of force, sexual harassment, or police brutality. They were also afraid because police had not been held to account for violent or unprofessional behaviour in the past, and some participants said that they were so afraid that they would avoid having any contact with police whatsoever.

> **If they pass by on the street, we go running, hiding. If we see them on the street we go running.**
>
> Anonymous, Switzerland

Some participants discussed being more fearful of police than of violent clients. They wouldn't call the police even if they would be raped or robbed.

> **There was a case; one of my friends was attacked in the apartment where we worked together. She was attacked by a client, literally raped and robbed. But she was afraid to report it to the police. I advised her to report the violence, but she did not want to.**
>
> Madona, North Macedonia

Participants said they worried about being fined, arrested, or prosecuted when coming into contact with police; undocumented migrants said they avoided the police because of fears of being deported. Participants who are migrant, trans sex workers, or workers of colour are regularly over-profiled by police and harassed through stop-and-frisk searches.

> **Some of us are illegal in the country. And again, they're scared they're going to be sent back if they're gonna call, so they prefer to accept that robbery, for example, or rape or something. [...] Because they're scared to call the police. They don't know if they're gonna come there for them or for what happened.**
>
> Mihaela, UK

Sex workers are also frightened of undercover police and of the violent and abusive nature of entrapment and sting operations. Some of those interviewed said they were sometimes scared of clients, but more so of the legal models that stopped them from seeking help. They said they were afraid even when they weren't working, as they had experienced being fined or arrested while grocery shopping with their children, or when having coffee with friends. They also said they were scared they would not be treated fairly, afraid to exercise their rights, and of repercussions when they did. Furthermore, participants experienced fear when police would raid their workplaces or residences and not announce themselves or read them their rights. They said they worried about disclosing their sex work to the police, because of how the stigma might affect their treatment.

> **I was afraid, I made myself an underground life, with nothing, like passing through, just like smoke.**
>
> Tais, Netherlands

The impact that this culture of fear has on sex workers is profound and long-lasting; participants reported experiencing panic attacks when in the presence of police or having heart palpitations even when spotting a police car. Some had to stop the interviews after discussing police interactions that happened as many as thirty years ago. Participants voiced that they were afraid to file complaints against violent individuals for fear of repercussions, such as losing custody of their children, being robbed by police, or being judged and discriminated against by other

state authorities or professionals linked to the justice system. Feelings of panic and fear were particularly acute among participants with experiences of having been detained, questioned, or imprisoned. They feared, for instance, that contact with the police would lead to evictions or repercussions from criminal gangs or other third parties.

Participants were also afraid of dying at the hands of police. They were scared that even the presence of police would push them into worse economic conditions. They were afraid of arrests, petrified of the inherently dehumanising nature of incarceration. Many reported that, when they did report crimes, they were nervous and would often leave before filing an official complaint, out of a need to get away from the police as fast as possible.

Sex workers have an astute understanding of what is happening in their communities, and why their experience of policing is the way that it is. Their lived experiences – what happens to them directly and what they witness happening to their friends and colleagues – represent invaluable data not only about policing culture in Europe but also about the ways in which sex workers are treated because of the widespread stigmatisation and criminalisation of sex work.

Understanding *what* sex workers are afraid of will help us to understand *why*; it locates sex workers' interactions with the police in an environment where criminalisation and stigmatisation combine to isolate sex workers, drive them into more precarious socio-economic conditions, and leave them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation, including violence perpetrated by the police.

POLICE VIOLENCE AND REPRESSION

This section of the report explores the interactions between sex workers and the police, identifying barriers to sex workers' access to justice and rights. We draw on our previous research, *Undeserving Victims*, which explored the various challenges faced by sex workers who are victims of crime (ESWA, 2020). Here, we focus specifically on different forms of mistreatment to which sex workers are subjected at the hands of police, including violence, discrimination, police corruption, and other forms of repression.

This section addresses both criminal acts, such as rape and torture, as well as practices that, while technically lawful – such as issuing fines, confiscating personal property, or physically restraining individuals – are often perceived as disproportionate and unjustified. Participants' accounts suggest that lawful measures can involve excessive force or abuse of authority. Although we have categorised these actions by the police into unlawful and lawful repression, police corruption, violence, and discrimination, they often inflict multiple forms of harm simultaneously, regardless of their legal status.

(UN)LAWFUL REPRESSION

This section focuses on different forms of repression experienced by sex workers at the hands of the police, which reflect the harmful and detrimental nature of existing sex work policies. We demonstrate how the criminalisation and other regulations implemented across the European region enable and encourage abusive law enforcement strategies that lead to rights violations against sex workers. Repressive sex work policies not only create an antagonistic relationship between sex workers and the police but also provide "cover and licence for police to control and punish sex workers" (Crago, 2015: 25), often in ways that are unlawful and amount to crimes. Whether lawful or not, this research finds that police repression impedes sex workers' safety and rights and constitutes a significant barrier in accessing justice and state protection.

OVER-POLICING

Data gathered in this research indicates that sex workers face intense policing regardless of the legal context in which they operate. In criminalised settings where the provision of sexual services is penalised and sex workers are viewed as offenders, police systematically target them. Even in countries where sex workers themselves are not penalised, laws criminalising third parties and clients transform sex work venues into spaces of heightened scrutiny, exposing workers to policing. Police presence and inspections in sex work venues are also common in countries that adopted regulation, with police officers determining compliance with the law. Additionally, sex workers are routinely subjected to various non-sex work-specific laws and by-laws, such as migration policies, traffic regulations, public morality and public order, and petty offenses regulations, across all regulatory models.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that all participants reported having had contact with the police, with over 80% of these encounters with law enforcement occurring during patrols, as well as through identity and residency checks. This indicates the high levels of surveillance and profiling to which sex workers are subjected, including gender and racial profiling, particularly targeting migrant, trans, and racialised sex workers, as well as those working in the open scene. Sex workers in closed scenes, such as indoor venues like brothels, massage parlours, and private apartments, also faced police interventions, including routine controls, ID checks, raids, and sting operations targeting presumed third parties and traffickers. Police presence was pervasive – some participants experienced police interventions several times per week, while others reported multiple incidents per day. The targeting and profiling of sex workers occurred not only in their workplaces but also outside of them. We documented cases when sex workers were stopped by police while walking down the street, shopping, dining in a restaurant, or having coffee with friends.

> **Everywhere they saw us, they fined us. We couldn't get out of the hotel. They saw us across the street and pursued us. We'd have coffee and they'd pick us up.**
>
> Katerina, Greece

> **One day, I went out in the city and was stopped by friends who greeted me. So I approached their car to greet them as well, and the police came from behind. They harassed me. They took me to the station. They held me all night, why? Why? [...] Supposedly they caught me in the act of offering sex for money. They didn't even hear the conversation, what it was about, and they just harassed me.**
>
> Anonymous, North Macedonia

Regardless of the legal model under which they worked, research participants perceived the high levels of police surveillance and control they experienced as oppressive rather than protective or conducive to safety. Several participants, particularly those working in the open scene, experienced this intense policing as abusive, amounting to harassment and stalking by the police.

> **The police were picking me up, harassing me all the time, every step of the way. [...] They knew us by sight, and it was very easy for them.**
>
> Patrycja, Poland

> **They harass us, they don't let us work, they stop the damn local police car in the street and don't let us work. [...] It's one thing if you stand there, you start trying to make a living and another thing if the police arrive, the police car stops in front of you. And they don't move. That's harassment.**
>
> Brigitt, Spain

EXCESSIVE PUNISHMENT: DETENTIONS, FINES, PROSECUTIONS, AND DEPORTATIONS

Police surveillance and targeting of sex workers and their workplaces were not only stressful and humiliating but also threatening, as they often led to further forms of punishment. Participants described fines, detention, and administrative or criminal charges to which they had been exposed. Depending on the legal model, those penalties were imposed for the (unauthorised or unlawful) provision of sexual services or soliciting, as well as for other non-sex work-specific offences such as loitering, littering, indecent behaviour, causing a public disturbance, or lack of identification documents. In contexts where brothel keeping and third-party engagement in sex work are criminalised, participants also faced the risk of prosecution for working together with other sex workers.

Sex workers have faced detentions following patrolling and raids on their workplaces in Armenia, North Macedonia, and Greece. Some sex workers have been subjected to excessive use of detention, which includes being held without being formally charged with a crime (European Commission [EC], 2023).

> **They were not allowing us to be on the street. As offenders, we were taken so that we cannot work. [...] They pick us up from the street, they take us to the station, and they lock us up in a separate room for detained people. They will hold you for a couple of hours and then say you are free to go. When we're asking why we were taken and held, they don't explain anything.**
>
> Anonymous, North Macedonia

As the quote above suggests, detentions were used as tools to punish sex workers and deter them from working in a given area. Natalie was also threatened with arrest and arrested as part of this 'punishment and deterrence' intervention.

> **Yes, when on the street, they want to arrest us if we don't leave the street. They come back to check. I've been arrested before.**
>
> Natalie, Belgium

We also documented instances where police officers used arrest and detention as a means to isolate and control sex workers, enabling them to commit physical and sexual abuse or to extort sex or money. One participant was arrested as punishment for refusing to have sex with a police officer.

> **And this particular policeman arrested me just because I didn't fuck him.**
>
> Maria, Greece

In subsequent sections of this report, we explore in more detail the experiences of sex workers when they are arrested, detained, or taken to the police station.

In addition to detentions and arrests, fines were a common form of punishment for sex workers. Fines for sex work-related and other offences were documented across countries with different legal models, including Belgium, Greece, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. In some contexts, imposing fines on sex workers was not an isolated incident but a systematic practice regularly employed by the police on a daily basis.

> **They give fines. And there can be 2 or 3 fines given to the same person every day.**
>
> Athena, Greece

> **There are, for example, times when they were issuing fines, it was every single day. [...] They attack you with fines, they nail you with very big fines.**
>
> Chumina, Spain

In Switzerland, where sex work is legal and meticulously policed, several sex workers have shared their experiences of being unjustly fined during unannounced police inspections or as a result of police provocation, when the officer posed as a client to impose a penalty.

> **One time, I was sleeping. I was naked. The police knocked at the door. I asked for them to wait. "If you don't open, we break the door." When I opened the door, I said that I had to find my keys and that I was naked. They checked my documents. I had to pay a fine because I didn't open the door quick enough.**
>
> Ana, Switzerland

> **Once a policeman gave me a fine. I was sitting on a bench just over here. And he came and said, what nice legs I have. What a nice dress. He asked me about my family, how many children I have. So I told him. I mean, he talked to me about a lot of things, like he was a client. And he asked me how much I charged him, and I said well, whatever you give me. Because I didn't ask for a price or anything. And when we went upstairs he said to me, "You're finito in Switzerland". And he fined me 450 francs. But it was him who took me up, he said come on, let's go. So I went upstairs. He wasn't a customer, he was a policeman.**
>
> Anonymous, Switzerland

The systematic imposition of fines pushes sex workers into economic hardship and financial insecurity. It forces them to work under less secure conditions in order to cover fines and make up for lost income. This financial pressure also renders sex workers more vulnerable to clients and the police, creating conditions for abuse, threats, and coercion. Several sex workers in Greece and Spain became seriously indebted due to the accumulation of fines over the years, and they had to spend all their earnings to pay them off. Two participants in Greece even faced prison time for being unable to pay the fines imposed on them.

Moreover, excessive policing and fines presented significant obstacles for sex workers in reporting acts of violence and seeking justice. The fear of being fined was frequently cited as a reason why sex workers were hesitant to approach the police when they were violated or harmed.

> **We all sometimes have a problem with a client in a room. We're not going to call the police. Why? Because we're going to get fined. So we try to stand up for ourselves. [...] Maybe faster, we'd call a colleague and say: "Look, come here, I'm having problems with this client." Why call the police? Because the police will come and they will fine us 700 francs, which in many countries is enough to pay for the children's food and water, electricity, and gas.**
>
> Cristina, Switzerland

Notably, the impact of policing and punitive measures extended far beyond fines and detentions. Seventeen participants working in countries where third-party engagement in sex work is criminalised told us about the legal risks they face when working together with their colleagues for safety. One participant in North Macedonia was sentenced for 15 days in prison for pimping while working alongside other sex workers in an open scene. Other participants in North Macedonia recounted being coerced into sex by police officers to avoid facing criminal charges for working with colleagues in the same apartment. In the UK, 7 participants were punished (including being wrongfully charged for running a brothel) or threatened with punishment simply for trying to ensure their own safety.

> **We have been penalised for keeping ourselves safe because we were working together. We would be working more safely because we have been attacked before. And because we were working together, they said it was a brothel. And that was the reason that the police had an excuse to come in and raid us, which led to my friend Patricia being arrested and deported.**
>
> Estelle, UK

> **I am working in a flat with other women. And yes, the police have come around and visited us. And they did threaten us that we could be done, for brothel keeping.**
>
> Jessica, UK

> **I was told to leave the place where we worked, otherwise they would arrest us because it was a brothel.**
>
> Marina, UK

Brothel-keeping and exploitation laws have trapped sex workers in a situation where efforts to work collectively and cooperatively put them at risk of criminalisation. Participants expressed that these laws have made them more isolated and pushed them into worse socio-economic conditions. Six participants from different countries also mentioned that their colleagues, friends, and partners as well as security personnel faced charges under 'pimping' laws for allegedly profiting from their sexual exploitation. Participants emphatically refuted these claims, stressing how harmful these laws are, as they force sex workers to work independently and alone, rendering them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

For migrant sex workers, routine policing, residency checks, and raids translated into practices of bordering – mechanisms of border control taking place beyond the physical border – which jeopardised their ability to stay in a given country (Diatlova & Näre, 2018; Dziuban, 2024a). Numerous migrant sex workers, including those documented and with regularised status, expressed deep fear of encountering the police or being subjected to anti-trafficking interventions, knowing that such encounters could result in punishment and deportation. Some participants even insisted that police raids and operations, conducted under the guise of 'rescuing' victims of exploitation and trafficking, specifically targeted migrant sex workers for deportation.

> **You see how they disguise their actions when they say it is about helping the girls or keeping them safe. But it is not true. They are not asking girls who they work for, and if they have been trafficked and all these things to help them. It is to deport them. And they trick girls, because they are acting all friendly, like they care, and then they get to sign things they do not understand and it is papers to be deported!**
>
> Marina, UK

Indeed, during police raids or routine check-ups, many migrant participants were detained. Nine participants were deported as a consequence of these operations.

CONFISCATION OF ASSETS AND THEFT

> **Because the problem is that the cops come to look for us – not because it's a crime, or forbidden, all that – they come to get money.**
>
> Caroline, France

> **They will always go for the money.**
>
> Mary, UK

Of the 174 participants asked, 29.3% reported having had their assets confiscated, including money, laptops, phones, jewellery, and other possessions.

In the Swedish model settings, 28% of participants had their assets confiscated, compared to 26.6% in regulated contexts and 22.5% in criminalised contexts. In partially criminalised contexts, 40% of participants had their assets confiscated, often occurring during raids on their venues and sting operations targeting third parties and presumed traffickers.

28.8% of non-migrants and 27.3% of migrants had their assets confiscated. Among trans women, 43.6% had money or possessions confiscated, compared to 22.1% of cis women and 30% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants. As many as 62.5% of cis men had their assets confiscated.

Among participants working in the closed scene, 24.7% had their possessions taken, while this had happened to slightly more participants working in the open scene (25.7%). Almost half of all participants working both indoors and outdoors had their possessions taken (47.4%).

22% of independent workers and 48.9% of those with experience of working for third parties had had that experience.

→ **SEE TABLE 9 IN THE APPENDIX.**

Although police officers are permitted by law to confiscate money and other assets suspected to be proceeds (or evidence) of crimes, such actions are strictly monitored by EU regulations (EC, n.d.a). Noteworthy, when legal proceedings involve the confiscation or seizure of assets of a victim or witness of a crime, their seized property should be returned to them. Following the logic of sex work regulation and criminalisation – that sex workers *are* indeed victims of, or witnesses to, an inherently criminal industry – the confiscation of and failure to return sex workers' assets is unlawful.

At least 18 participants reported having their money confiscated and not returned to them, either through revenue collection, outright theft, or opportunistic theft (particularly during detentions and arrests).

> **"They've got all our stuff. They took it all. As far as I'm concerned, they stole it all.**
>
> Bethany Rose, UK

Confiscating sex workers' assets – even when done lawfully (which, as we will explore, has not been a common experience for participants) – contributes to their economic disadvantage and chronic indebtedness. The seizure of money or possessions renders sex workers more vulnerable and increases their reliance on sex work to recover their losses or replace their possessions.

'Confiscation' is far too neutral a term for what participants in this research experienced; they had their money stolen by police officers. Sex workers are easy targets because they do not enjoy equal protection under the law and do not usually receive a fair trial. It is evident that this vulnerability is exploited by police officers. For example, Erika was arrested, and both her and her husbands' money was stolen from their wallets.

> **"They pushed me and they even surrounded me, and they stole 140 euros from my wallet. They took it from me. And they ignored me. The fools, they said, "No, no." [...] And my husband [...] they took my partner's wallet and they took 140 euros. [...] He says "Play dumb, or I'll take you to jail, too."**
>
> Erika, Spain

When the hotel room of Catalina and her husband (who are both sex workers) was raided by five armed policemen, they took 4,000 euros from them.

> **We had to go to court to prove that we were married, that we were married and he wasn't my pimp. Unbelievable, 4,000 euros and to this day, nothing.**
>
> Catalina, The Netherlands

In cases where money is confiscated as evidence of criminal activity, individuals may face challenges in retrieving their funds. Whether it is due to the involvement of individual police officers or the costly bureaucratic process, the money is often not returned to them.

> **They charged me with running a brothel, and they took my money when they raided my home. And then I was found not guilty. But it would cost me too much money to get it back. So, I couldn't get it back. I owed around 15,000 pounds. I only managed to keep my house because my children paid the mortgage. When I was found not guilty, the police said, "So we're taking your money."**
>
> Connie, UK

When participants' money or possessions were returned, it was often after a period of six months or longer. For instance, Marion Lew's laptop and phone were confiscated because a police search unrelated to sex work uncovered erotic content she had produced (notably, *not* an offence in France) two years prior. At the time of the interview, she was still waiting for the belongings to be returned to her.

> **They took everything from my phone, computer, and hard drive, even though the police search was about selling clothes. [...] They listed all the pornographic items in my belongings, even though they had absolutely nothing to do with the current investigation. I don't know why they confiscated my stuff, because I do pornography, it's not forbidden. They don't want to give it back to me.**
>
> Marion Lew, France

Confiscations of arbitrary possessions such as earrings, lingerie, and even vehicles were also common. Aline, a sex worker who has cancer, was arrested on the charge of brothel keeping. She had her car confiscated, and noted the absurdity of taking her car as 'evidence' that she was operating a brothel.

> **It was confiscated under the pretext that I used it to commit the offence. But I find it an abuse of power. You don't confiscate a car from a sick woman. Especially since there was nothing in this car. It was used, yes, to make the journeys to and from work, but it seems that it was confiscated because it was used by me to commit the offence. What if I took the bus? Would they confiscate the bus or what? I find that ridiculous.**
>
> Aline, Belgium

Participants also mentioned being blackmailed in order to have their possessions returned to them. When an anonymous participant in North Macedonia had her home raided and drugs were found, police also took money from her. She was promised that **"if I frame one of the dealers, they will give me the money back. I didn't want to, and I didn't get the money back"** (Anonymous, North Macedonia). This conditional return of assets to individuals is unlawful.

Some had been forced to have sex with police officers to have their possessions returned.

> **They wanted to take away the mobile phones that were for work. They didn't take them, because my friend agreed to give them a sexual service free of charge. Just so they don't take her phones.**
>
> Sani, North Macedonia

When police officers were clients of participants, they robbed them after the service.

> **They came in the form of a customer, I sat down, they took the money from my bag, they even took a box of napkins.**
>
> Lilit, Armenia

Notwithstanding the other ways through which police extract money from sex workers (in the form of extortion, coercion, fines, or other forms of revenue collection), forms of theft (of money, or other possessions) and the destruction of property were recorded more than 70 times throughout the data.

CONFISCATION OF SAFER SEX MATERIALS

Of the 170 participants asked, 14.1% had safer sex materials confiscated by the police. The confiscation of condoms occurred in nine of the countries under study. Confiscating safer sex materials, such as condoms, lube, or pre-exposure prophylactics (PrEP), does not deter the exchange of sexual services. Rather, it only increases the risks to sex workers' health, safety, and well-being (Collier, 2014; European AIDS Treatment Group [EATG], 2018; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2012; LSHTM, 2018). This result might be explained by the fact that sex workers might remove safer sex materials themselves before the police can confiscate them, or may not carry many to begin with, as was mentioned by Joy in Switzerland and Zuzia in Poland. Participants mentioned avoiding police when carrying these sorts of materials, such as Muri in Spain. Additionally, some participants lied about the purpose of carrying these items, such as Angela in Sweden, Orla in France, and Nefeli in Greece.

→ SEE TABLE 9 IN THE APPENDIX FOR A BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA ON CONFISCATIONS BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS.

The confiscation of materials like condoms renders sex workers more vulnerable, forcing them to choose between engaging in unprotected sex with clients or losing out on their earnings.

> **It happened when the police approached me and they took everything from me so that I could not continue working. I always have intercourse using a condom and I won't have sex without a condom. They took everything from me and after they left, if a client approached me, I was not able to go to work, because I definitely wouldn't have unprotected sex.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

Similar instances have occurred for other participants in Armenia, too.

> **Every time they would ask me whether I had condoms. They would tell me to give them some. They would open my bag and take them.**
>
> Hasmik, Armenia

The confiscation of safer sex materials was also used as a form of power abuse and as a tool to arbitrarily punish sex workers, as seen in Albiona's case.

> **They did that so that we don't work there. Because we do not cooperate with them. The cop threw out all my stuff.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

Jenny, who was working in the open scene in the UK, told us about routine police inspections where she was fined for every condom she had with her.

> **Around 100 pounds. At one stage, your fine depended on how many condoms you had on you. So the more you had the more your fine was. I don't think they were really concerned about our safety. If we had no condoms on us, we wouldn't get much of a fine.**
>
> Jenny, UK

Sex workers are punished for attempting to keep themselves safe at work. This hypocrisy is further highlighted by participants' accounts of police forcing them to have sex with them without using a condom, as Lile explains.

> **Police officers would insist on having sex without condoms.**
>
> Lile, North Macedonia

During attempts to report crimes committed against them, participants experienced having their safer sex materials confiscated by police.

In some countries, including North Macedonia, sex workers also reported that their condoms had been used as 'evidence' of unlawful activity, such as selling sex. A report by Open Society Foundations found that "the criminalization of sex work and use of condoms as evidence makes sex workers particularly vulnerable to police abuse" (Shields, 2012).

Condoms are used by police as evidence of sex work, but using safer sex materials as evidence towards criminal activities is insufficient and reflects the ignorance of sex working practices by the police and the criminal justice system. A participant in North Macedonia was taken to court for carrying one condom. Article 205 of North Macedonia's criminal code, titled 'Crimes Against Human Health' (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 2002), has been wrongfully used against sex workers, prosecuting them for allegedly transmitting infectious diseases with intent. If found guilty, the punishment for such an act is 3 years' imprisonment. Condoms are used as 'evidence' towards sex workers' intentions to act unlawfully, despite the fact that condoms are internationally recognised as tools for disease prevention (World Health Organisation [WHO], n.d.).

> **Once, I was even taken to court for one condom. I swear. [...] Because they found one condom, I was taken to court.**
>
> Anonymous, North Macedonia

Another participant in North Macedonia, Jagoda, was in fact convicted under Article 205, with condoms being used as evidence towards this conviction. (She was also tortured by police officers when detained.) We were told that this conviction under Article 205 was unprecedented in North Macedonia's legal history.

Condoms might also be used as evidence against unauthorised sex work venues, as suggested by Aline, whose workplace had been raided by the police.

> **They confiscated all kinds of stuff like that, probably to prove it was a house of ill repute [brothel].**
>
> Aline, Belgium

This indicates the risk that the presence of condoms at a venue might incriminate workers or management in countries where brothel keeping, third parties, and working together for safety are criminalised. This risk can discourage sex workers and third parties from keeping safer sex materials on site, rendering sex workers more vulnerable to HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unwanted pregnancies.

OUTING AND DOXXING

Our research revealed that outing and doxxing sex workers by police officers was not uncommon. Although we did not directly ask about outing and doxxing during the interviews, 20 participants in seven countries, including France, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, reported that police officers had revealed their identity or other identifying information to others or the general public without their consent.

Two participants described being interrogated at police stations in a manner that exposed their identity to everyone present, showing a disregard for their privacy and safety. Three participants told us about instances where the police disclosed their occupation to family members against their will. This included police officers visiting the family homes of sex workers (where they had not lived for years) and revealing their occupation to relatives. For example, Billy's parents were contacted by the police while he was in detention.

> **They didn't respect my wishes and my privacy. They called my parents, just like that, and said, "Your son is being prostituted and we have him at the police station."**
>
> Billy, Greece

Two other sex workers in Greece reported having convict letters (notifications from the police stating that they were charged with the illicit provision of sexual services) attached to the doors of their homes, visible to everyone, including family members, neighbours, and passers-by. According to the sex workers we interviewed in Greece, this is a common practice. It not only outs sex workers but also subjects them to public shaming and ostracism by their community.

> **They stick it on the door. And it has the law written on the cover. So anyone who wants to read it can. What for? [...] That to me is the worst thing. [...] Having your child read it, your neighbour, your landlord, your father, your mother.**
>
> Alma, Greece

Several participants in Sweden and in France told us about threats of losing housing because police informed their landlords they were renting to a sex worker. Three participants were evicted as a result of these police interventions. One sex worker, Dingtang, explained how police officers used laws that criminalise landlords for renting to sex workers as a means to out, harass, and punish migrant sex workers.

> **There are also police who are looking for where you live, and they are phoning the landlords so that you lose the apartment. They do that on purpose, also so that you lose precisely the place of work, your living place. They don't care how you will survive as a person, without housing and without income, without the possibility of earning, of working. It's not the policeman's concern. All he wants is for you to lose the money and get out of that place. [...] We can very well sign a contract with the apartment owner, but if the owner is summoned by the police stations who say, "You are housing someone, you can be arrested for pimping", he can annul the contract. The next day, he can chase you away, make you go away. You are not protected. The policeman never cares about that aspect, what happens afterwards.**
>
> Dingtang, France

Police exposure of sex workers to imminent danger, precarity, and violence by outing them was also evident in the case of Prune in France. Her personal information, including her personal data and place of work, was leaked by a police officer to a violent client who then stalked and harassed her over an extended period. Similarly, one sex worker in Sweden reported being harassed and stalked by a client who received her identifying information from the police after being charged with the purchase of sex.

> **This is also a thing that means that the law that is supposed to protect us actually makes it a little more dangerous for us with an angry customer who gets caught. And it is the police who have outed you to the customer. Otherwise, he wouldn't have known who it was. But the police have outed you to the customer and made the customer angry with you. It's the law's fault that this happened. That's how I see it, that it's the law's fault that it's like this.**
>
> Sandra, Sweden

Our data also revealed 8 instances where police provided confidential or sensitive information to the media and press. For instance, during raids and closures of brothels, police broadcast the addresses of sex workers' homes, with no regard for the potential consequences of such exposure.

> **In fact they put me at risk because they broadcasted the location. [...] The person who was there, living there, was getting knocks on the door and people were asking if the brothel's open. She had to get her boyfriend to answer the door to tell the guys to go away. And the police don't care if you told the police that they've made you unsafe now. They just do their job, making everybody's life miserable.**
>
> Bethany, UK

Sharing the addresses of sex workers' workplaces (e.g. in the news and on social media) puts them at risk of social isolation due to the harmful stigma surrounding sex work. It also highlights their locations to potentially violent clients or established criminal groups seeking to control sex work in the area.

Seven participants from 5 countries (France, Greece, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) told us about situations where sex workers' personal data, including names, surnames, and photos (mugshots), were leaked to and published by the press. Such actions constitute doxxing – the act of revealing personal information online without consent – especially as a form of punishment or revenge. This represents gross misconduct by the police and a blatant breach of sex workers' right to privacy. Instead of providing safety and support, police officers violated sex workers' rights and exposed them to public shaming, mistreatment, harassment, and violence.

Several participants in the context of the Swedish model had their data leaked and published in the media under the guise of 'concern' for victims of prostitution and sexual exploitation. This alleged concern often serves as a pretext for punishing individuals for engaging in what is viewed as an immoral profession. This illustrates how regulations that purport to reduce exploitation can actually put sex workers at risk of police abuse. These regulations also push sex workers into more precarious socio-economic conditions, ironically increasing their reliance on sex work. For example, when Kira's home was raided, her status as a sex worker was doxxed in the local newspaper, and she was subsequently fired from her non-sex work job.

> **I kind of feel like I'm being trafficked, you know? I'm trying to take a regular job but the police make sure I quit my job, so I have to do sex work: isn't that kind of like being trafficked? I feel that the police forced me to do sex work, because they made sure I couldn't get a regular job.**
>
> Kira, Sweden

POLICE CORRUPTION

Police corruption is defined as "deviant, dishonest, improper, unethical or criminal behaviour by a police officer" (Barker & Roebuck, 1973: 3). It has also been named as "the abuse of power/authority" by Newburn (1999: 14), who adds that corruption is the "intention to gain further advantage, [either] private or organisational" (Newburn, 1999: 14).

It is widely acknowledged that "corruption of policing can rapidly undermine the rule of law and significantly curb citizens' basic human rights" (Center for the Study of Democracy [CSD], 2013: 17). The Council of Europe (CoE) states that corruption "is rightly called one of the most insidious social phenomena," and that it "has a disproportionate impact on the enjoyment of human rights, particularly by people that belong to marginalised or disadvantaged groups such as minorities, people with disabilities, refugees, migrants and prisoners" (Mijatović, 2021).

The process of police corruption can be understood through the lens of the 'slippery slope' theory, postulating that small infractions, when left unsanctioned, lead to more serious offences (CSD, 2013: 10). This theory highlights the importance of challenging seemingly small and commonplace forms of discrimination, such as insults or disregard, as they can create an environment conducive to more severe forms of violence. Consequently, the Council of Europe prioritises combating corruption in all its forms, with the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO)[13] assuming the responsibility of monitoring these efforts.

Within the scope of this research, the instances of police corruption were not isolated occurrences. Instead, they permeated various police interactions, ranging from routine, everyday encounters with the police – such as being verbally harassed and called a 'whore' while going about daily activities – to more serious situations such as being detained when reporting a crime. This section aims to illustrate the widespread nature and severity of police corruption and misconduct.

Our research findings reveal a wide range of incidents of police corruption, some of which have already been discussed. Data from this research uncovered incidents such as alcohol and substance use while on duty; arbitrary enforcement of the law; blackmail; taking bribes; brutality; coercion (forcing sex workers to provide information or sex); destruction of property; excessive use of force; extortion; forcing confessions; gratuitous violence; intimidation tactics and treatment in detention that amounts to torture; planting evidence; police closing ranks, protecting colleagues who have behaved unprofessionally or unlawfully; individual officers being involved in organised crime such as trafficking rings; rape and sexual assault; theft; unchecked abuses of power; and general unprofessional conduct.

13 https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco

The incidents of police corruption experienced by participants have significantly eroded their trust in law enforcement. These incidents also cover the broad spectrum of police misconduct, corruption, and other offences, further supporting the claim that "the EU has witnessed several glaring instances in which police actions have gone beyond what is legally and ethically acceptable" (Guittet *et al.*, 2022). The criminalisation of sex work – and the combative relationship this creates between police and sex workers – greatly encourages police corruption. In contrast, decriminalisation has been shown to reduce police corruption (Mactioti *et al.*, 2022).

RECOMMENDATION NO. R (2000) 10 OF THE COMMITTEE OF MINISTERS TO MEMBER STATES ON CODES OF CONDUCT FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Article 5.2: The public official is expected to be honest, impartial and efficient and to perform his or her duties to the best of his or her ability with skill, fairness and understanding, having regard only for the public interest and the relevant circumstances of the case.

Article 6: In the performance of his or her duties, the public official should not act arbitrarily to the detriment of any person, group or body and should have due regard for the rights, duties and proper interests of all others.

Article 8.1: The public official should not allow his or her private interest to conflict with his or her public position. It is his or her responsibility to avoid such conflicts of interest, whether real, potential or apparent.

Article 8.2: The public official should never take undue advantage of his or her position for his or her private interest.

ARBITRARY ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAW

> **Yeah, fear and distrust. You never know how they're gonna be. They can just throw the book at you and you ain't done nothing.**
>
> Mandy, UK

Article 6 of the Recommendation No. R (2000) 10 of the Committee of Ministers to Member states on codes of conduct for public officials states that "in the performance of his or her duties, the public official should not act arbitrarily to the detriment of any person, group or body and should have due regard for the rights, duties and proper interests of all others" (CoE, 2000). That notwithstanding, sex workers across all legal contexts are faced with the discretionary authority of the police, including arbitrary and unlawful arrests and detentions, fines, opportunistic theft, and over-policing, as discussed above. The arbitrary enforcement of the law, alongside the unpredictability of police behaviour, was a common theme in the data. Participants discussed how police bias had fostered their mistrust and general unease when dealing with police.

> **You can't trust the police. Because one minute you're okay to work, the next minute you're not.**
>
> Connie, UK

Police behaviour was described as unpredictable, increasing fear among participants, particularly among multiply marginalised sex workers, including migrants.

> **I know once everybody sees the police, they all become scared. Then it's always the same. You just become scared. You freeze, because you don't know their next move. Because, at times, they can control the documents and everything is fine, but most of the time something is not ok. [...] For immigrant sex workers [...] it depends on who comes. [...] You might have luck, you might be out of luck.**
>
> Jessy, Switzerland

> **Some are friendly and some of them are unfriendly. [...] Some of them care and some don't care. It is not always the same ones who care.**
>
> Sofia, Switzerland

Participants discussed the differences in police interactions across different neighbourhoods.

> **If we're in Brussels, if we're in Lièvre, if we're in Namur, if we're in Charleroi, if we're... Yes, their behaviour is different. It's as if there were different codes between them in each province.**
>
> Jessy, Belgium

> **There may be police officers who are very nice. But in the same neighbourhood, perhaps in the same group of police officers, there may be a person who is discriminatory, who seeks to denounce the women's apartments, who tries to prevent women from working on the streets, etcetera.**
>
> Dingtang, France

The treatment of individual sex workers varied depending on their personal relationships with specific police officers, revealing the unreliability of the police as an institution.

> **Those who knew me, treated me very well. Those who didn't have behaved very badly.**
>
> Hasmik, Armenia

Beyond contributing to fear and general mistrust of the police, the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of interactions with law enforcement was one of the key factors preventing sex workers from accessing justice. Many participants stated that they fear reporting violence or seeking police help if they have been violated or hurt, because they are unsure whether doing so might put them in further danger or expose them to some form of punishment.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE AND ABUSES OF POWER

> **It's not normal that we give weapons and the right to be violent to people who are sexist, racist, psychophobic, whorephobic. It is not normal.**
>
> Orla, France

There are several international human rights principles that govern the use of force and firearms by law enforcement officials. They include the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality. Force must have a "sufficient legal basis" (Heyns, 2014: 10) and only be used for lawful law enforcement purposes. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, "The question is whether force should be used at all, and if so, how much. This means that force must be a last resort" (Heyns, 2014: 10). Proportionality dictates that the harm caused by the use of force must be weighed against its benefits, i.e. whether it achieves a legitimate objective. "It thus determines at what point the escalation of force that is necessary to achieve that objective must stop" (Heyns, 2014: 11).

Excessive use of force by police has received significant attention in recent years. Following the murder of George Floyd in the United States, the issue of excessive and unjustified use of force by law enforcement officials was also highlighted as a grave concern in Europe. As stated in a draft resolution adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, "The Parliamentary Assembly regrets that law enforcement officers in member States of the Council of Europe have used excessive force in many cases, violating the principles of necessity, proportionality, precaution, and non-discrimination" (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2022: 1). While the focus of this issue was on protests, it also brought attention to the racist and discriminatory practices of police forces, despite a long history of anti-racist movements denouncing the brutality and violence experienced by marginalised groups – particularly Black and people of colour – at the hands of the police (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022).

The European Convention on Human Rights and Policing has asserted that "the problem of excessive and unjustified use of force by police and other law enforcement agencies throughout Europe is a chronic one" (Murdoch & Roche, 2013: 23), and that "excessive force during arrest or questioning may constitute inhuman treatment, or even torture" (Murdoch & Roche, 2013: 35).

Our research findings indicate that police responses towards sex workers are disproportionate in terms of both the number and the severity of aggressions. Participants reported experiencing frightening and traumatic encounters, particularly during raids and sting operations, where the

excessive use of force by the police was comparable to that of criminals or violent individuals. There is a particular contradiction here, too, of police executing raids in order to save victims, while simultaneously engaging in such violent behaviour that participants fear for their lives.

> **I saw them arriving and wanted to open the door for them. But they still used their big drill to break my lock. As if it were for the sheer pleasure of damaging. They shouted in my ears, "Your name, your first name! Are there other people in the house?" But they really screamed. And then straight away, another one was zip-tying my hands behind my back. [...] So, they were there with their balaclavas, their helmets. There was even one at the bottom of the garden like a soldier, legs wide apart, machine gun, as if there were any chance of us running away. Ultimately, it was a truly traumatic arrest, especially considering that, after 30 years, we were, I'd say, relatively calm. The vice squad had come by often over the years, no one had ever told me we had to declare our income, or any of that. We wondered what was happening. I was asking myself if one of the girls had brought drugs or a dealer, I thought about that. I don't take any drugs. But I didn't know what was happening. At least 10 or 12 of them arrived. [...] A dozen in civilian clothes, followed by another 10 in uniform. Both men and women. But the Delta Forces were real brutes. They had machine guns, like criminals, and were scary. I even asked myself afterwards, what if I had tried to run out of reflex, out of fear. Would they have shot?**
>
> Aline, Belgium

> **It was very aggressive, you know, like what you see in the movies. They broke down the doors and came in, shouting to stay on the ground, breaking into the rooms, and pulling us out. It is a frightening experience because you are scared they will shoot you on the spot or something, because it is chaos and you cannot think properly amidst all the noise. And you cannot see anything, what with the lights they are putting in your eyes. So even though they are shouting "Police!", you don't think it's police because it's like you are getting raided by a gang or something. So it's very scary. I was in a room with a client, and they were pulling us out of the rooms. They grabbed us with only our underwear on and searched everything. There were a lot of men and they were very frightening, asking all kinds of questions. And some of the girls didn't speak much English. It was like what you think they would do if they knew for sure there is some armed gangster or someone like that inside. It calmed down when they saw there was nothing to find, no drugs, and no children or women locked up.**
>
> Mali, UK

Maria described a raid that took place at her home and how frightening it was to see how much one of the police officers seemed to relish his predatory behaviour towards her.

> **It was so damn creepy! I didn't know what was wrong with that man. Then he gave me one of those damn psychopathic smiles. Imagine this crisis situation for me. If he had had any compassion for me, he would have realised that I felt bad that he came. Then he smiled one of those smiles and said, "Shouldn't we let the others in?" Like, "Hey, here we come for a little visit, why don't we let the others in?" [...] And there was the whole bloody army. The stairs were fucking full of police! Everyone was going into my small apartment.**
>
> Maria, Sweden

The overtly sexualised enjoyment that Maria described – the police officer's suggestion "Why don't we let the others in?" with its euphemistic undertones – represents a clear abuse of power. This is particularly disturbing in a legislative context like Sweden, where carceral solutions are promoted as a means of protecting women from violent individuals.

Participants also noted an atmosphere of violence and aggression, marked by displays of excessive brutality and instances where participants were treated as if they posed a threat to the safety of police officers.

> **During club raids, girls were thrown to the ground and treated as if they were carrying weapons or something, even though their hands were empty and they could see they had nothing. In the cold, they were carried out in their underwear from the clubs to the automobiles, since they couldn't get clothed or anything. [...] People in the clubs – specifically employees, but frequently also clients – were treated like criminals and demoted to the lowest social position. It's as if they didn't deserve to know what was going on. And no one cared how they felt or if, for example, they were scared and disoriented. They were perplexed. It actually degraded them terribly. As I have stated, there was a great deal of violence in these actions.**
>
> Rena, Poland

As already noted, the European Convention on Human Rights and Policing states that "Police actions during public order situations must be lawful and proportionate" (Murdoch & Roche, 2013: 315). This is not compatible with forcing women to stand outside in the cold wearing only their underwear. Moreover, these displays of violence and the fear they induce "can damage relations with the community and make the work of the police more difficult in the long term. It corrodes the relationship between the police and the public and can lead to a breakdown of trust and communication" (Murdoch & Roche, 2013: 106).

During her arrest, one participant witnessed another unchecked abuse of power, when a police officer brutally slapped a minor while stating that he had always wanted to act in such a violent manner.

> **I will always remember it. I was a minor, I had a deposit for my apartment, all that. They arrested us. They searched us all and took us to the station. And there, in the room before entering the... What do you call it? The cell. It shocked me for life. Obviously, I was in a boy's body, I was a bit effeminate, because that's kind of my nature. And I was really shocked. There was an old officer... if I understood correctly, he was about to retire soon. And he said, "I've always dreamed of doing this." He had the handcuffs and he slapped him across the face. I said, "Stop!" to which he replied, "Shut up, you fucking pussy [*sale fiotte*]." And that was the first time when I realised that yes, this brutality exists, it's really true. It's not just in the movies. Yeah. That really shocked me, back then.**
>
> Jessy, Belgium

Enacting violence for their own pleasure was a common theme. Some participants discussed the behaviour of police officers as a demonstration of toxic masculinity (Cunningham, 2022; Da Silva Carvalho, 2023).

> **It's an atmosphere of toxic masculinity and aggression. [...] They are in this poisonous environment, which affirms their toxicity and boosts their self-esteem. And their feeling of social usefulness is also developed on toxicity and ill-treatment of others.**
>
> Agnieszka, Poland

The misuse of power and the evident power imbalance between the police and sex workers creates conditions where it becomes unwise or risky for sex workers to assert their rights for fear of violent retribution.

> **The police are always the strong ones. As long as they see me as a weak creature that they can exploit, there can never be an equal dialogue or an improvement in the relationship between us. Because they come with weapons into your home. It's very difficult to have an equal relationship with someone who carries a weapon.**
>
> Maria, Sweden

> **Never argue with the police: if it's raining and an officer says it's sunny, put away the umbrella and say, "God, it's hot."**
>
> Rosa, Spain

When faced with police authority, participants often find themselves stuck, unable to resist, and forced to comply with officers' demands, regardless of the lawfulness of their requests.

> **They wanted to fuck me. They had found me having sex with a client. They identified the client and said, "Why are you coming here? You know it's a man? So you like men? You like to fuck men or get fucked?" All in front of me. Then one of the policemen was checking me out, he started touching my ass, and all that. And I said, "Hey, stop!" The other officers were a bit further away, and the officer said, "Well, they want to fuck you." You know, the police are corrupt, like everywhere else too.**
>
> Luciana, The Netherlands (incident occurred in France)

The intensity and severity of the police abuse experienced by the sex workers who participated in this research further support existing evidence that marginalised communities are disproportionately subjected to police violence and brutality (AI, 2016b, 2020; ENAR, 2021; Fair Trials, 2022; Ozkan & Stevens, 2021).

EXTORTION OF MONEY

In addition to the aforementioned fines, asset confiscations, and theft, extortion of money and bribes were common strategies used by police officers to collect sex workers' revenue. We documented cases of money extortion, i.e. police officers coercing sex workers to give away their earnings, in six countries under study, including Armenia, Belgium, Greece, North Macedonia, Poland, and Spain. Extortion differs from administrative fines or lawful confiscations in that such acts by police officers are unauthorised and the money thereafter unaccounted for, personally benefiting police officers, similar to money stolen from sex workers during raids, detentions, or arrests.

Money extortion was particularly prevalent in criminalised contexts, where sex workers operate outside the law (Crago, 2009, 2015). The lack of social or legal protections rendered sex workers vulnerable to police demands for money (as well as sex or other 'benefits'), often backed by threats of arrest, fines, or violence. Participants in Armenia and North Macedonia talked about a systemic pattern of police extortion occurring during raids, detentions, and patrolling.

> **Regardless of whether we had worked that day, we had to pay 400 dollars. That police officer used to come every week, and we always had to give him 400 dollars.**
>
> Hasmik, Armenia

> **They say to us, "You work more than us, you get paid more than we do, [so] at least let us make some money off of you. If you don't want that, you better run, you can't work here. I will take you downtown, I will keep you for 24 hours, and you will have no excuse because, since I am the authority, I can play with you as I see fit." When I refused he started hitting me, saying "Mind your own business or it will be you who I take downtown where you'll be beaten even more." And that was that. I left. The girl had to go around the corner, the cop caught them on the spot, took 200 euros from the client, 100 from the girl. Oftentimes the police do that to us. They make a habit of hanging around and taking our money. And unless we cooperate, we won't have a job. They chase us away.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

As indicated by both Hasmik and Albiona, police officers in North Macedonia deliberately exploit sex workers' vulnerability to prosecution to subject them to further exploitation. Rather than penalising them directly (for the provision of sexual services or soliciting), police use threats of punishment and violence to syphon off their income.

Similar patterns of extortion and labour exploitation also occurred in partially criminalised contexts. For example, in Poland, where provision of sexual services is not penalised, Patrycja reported that a police officer demanded a share of her earnings in order for her to be able to continue working. Such exploitation of sex workers' income, as intended by this officer, constitutes a criminal offence in Poland.

> **I stood on the road for a long time and the police came to control me and take down my details. They asked, "How's the business going?" Then they left and that was it. They were gone. But then the same guy who had just arrived in a police car drove up to me in plainclothes in his car. He wanted me to pay him money for standing in the parking lot. He would take my money and then leave me alone. But if I wouldn't pay him, I couldn't work there anymore. Either I made a deal with him, or I would no longer be able to stand in this parking lot. He said I should think about it and gave me a week's time.**
>
> Patrycja, Poland

Sex workers in the most vulnerable positions, including undocumented migrants, were particularly exposed to extortion or forced to give bribes to the police to avoid detention or deportation across different legal contexts.

> **If you work in a flat or club and don't have any documents when the police come, then they harass, blackmail, or extort you. That's how it is.**
>
> Linda, Spain

Other participants described the exploitation they experienced by police as being comparable to that inflicted by organised crime rings. Michelle, who was repeatedly coerced into bribing the police, stated:

> **They acted like our pimps. But since it was the police [...] we couldn't do anything because they pressured us.**
>
> Michelle, Belgium

Especially for sex workers living in poverty, such financial losses due to police extortion and bribes constitute a serious financial burden.

FORCING CONFESSIONS

In the context of arrests and detentions, excessive use of force and abuse of power by police officers were prevalent. Several participants reported that during interrogations, police officers resorted to unlawful tactics to force confessions from them.

> **I was told that if I didn't tell them the truth, they would lock me up at any time. And I was blackmailed and threatened with arrest three times during the interrogation.**
>
> Kornelia, Poland

> **One of my friends told me she had experienced that. She is an immigrant with no legal status in the UK. She said that one day the police came to raid the house where she worked and threatened her that she must tell them who her 'boss' is. And if she didn't give them that information, they were going to take her to the immigration centre and deport her.**
>
> Mary, UK

> **Sometimes they become a little bit annoyed because they try to force the person to say you have been trafficked, and they try to convince you. [...] They tried to coerce me into saying I was being trafficked. They told me they were recording it, and they said, "Now you mentioned that you've been trafficked?" and I said, "I'm not being trafficked. I live in the UK. I am from the UK."**
>
> Sasha, UK

Across the data, we documented 31 instances of police trying to force or successfully forcing sex workers into making confessions. However, we believe this to be a conservative estimate since we did not ask participants directly about such experiences. Further research is required to understand how police officers use sex workers' vulnerable and criminalised status to manipulate them during interrogations. This unlawful and corrupt practice not only further endangers sex workers but also shields violent police from being held accountable.

INTIMIDATION TACTICS

In addition to being forced to make confessions, participants in detention were subjected to unlawful intimidation tactics and treatment that amounted to torture.

Article 1 of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity" (OHCHR, 1987).

Instances of torture and profound dehumanisation during arrests and detentions were viewed by some police officers as a source of entertainment. Bulba described how police humiliated her colleague by denying her access to menstrual products.

> **"She was bleeding. They wouldn't let her change her sanitary napkin or tampon. Her pants were covered in clots, her thighs were all bloody. She wasn't allowed to wash herself, and she was taken to the police station like this. And [...] when she was stopped, she had her period and said she needed a tampon. And the police said, "Hahaha, you can only put your finger in it" [to catch the bleeding]. They body searched her. She was all covered in blood and had to bend over and everything. And then they let her out with those bloody pants. She was covered in blood.**
>
> Bulba, Poland

Weaponising menstruation as a means to humiliate and deprive people of their dignity has been well documented (Bozelko, 2020; Mortimer, 2018), with Avery Broome explaining that "lack of access to period products causes physical and mental harm and fosters corrupt uses of power in prison" (Broome, 2022: 242). This form of punishment is a cruel and deeply misogynistic assault on participants' dignity.

Other instances of humiliation and indignity were mentioned by participants in Poland. For example, while in solitary confinement, Bulba was denied access to menstrual care products and forced to wash herself on camera in front of prison guards.

> **"I went to solitary, as punishment for not wanting to say anything that would satisfy them. I was there for three weeks. You can't stay in solitary confinement for a long time, because it can affect your mental health a bit. [...] And in this hell, he tells me, "Welcome to [the world of] crime." Then he slammed the door in my face. [...] I rang this bell and said I wanted to wash up. He said, "It's not a hotel" and that the bathhouse**

> **was open on Mondays and Fridays. He closed the door and later brought some woman officer who said that I can rinse myself with water. I said, "Any soap, towel, clean clothes?" He said there wasn't any. I said, "Well, I won't wash then. A bowl, please." He gave me a basin and soap. I washed my pants there and a shirt, in front of these cameras, naked. [...] And there were guys watching, you know.**
>
> Bulba, Poland

In Spain, Carolina was arrested and detained following violence she experienced at work. She was subjected to intimidating and cruel treatment while held by the police.

> **My friend left, my heel was bloody, and the police treated me as if I was a terrorist. I went to prison and later they deported me. I was just arrested, they stripped me completely naked and put me in a cell. They didn't give me any food. I was locked up in there for 24 hours and wasn't given anything. No blankets, no sheets, nothing. I was completely covered in blood, my whole shirt was full of blood, but they gave me nothing.**
>
> Carolina, Spain

Tactics centred around cruel behaviour meant to compel participants to submit to the police. During a 5-hour interrogation, police officers taunted Kira by keeping her phone next to her while her child repeatedly called, trying to locate her. However, the officers wouldn't allow her to communicate with her child.

> **It was really hard because my kids – my son had a really bad day that day, and he had already called me several times. I needed to have the phone near me, so I could answer if he called or [texted]. I had to struggle with that the entire time that they kept the phone near me. They didn't take it out of the room.**
>
> Kira, Sweden

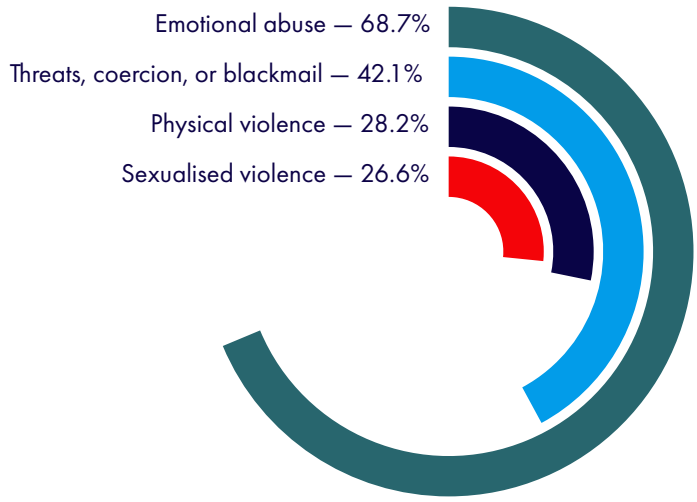
OTHER FORMS OF CORRUPTION

Other forms of corruption recorded during interviews with participants include destruction of their property, police officers using alcohol and substances while on duty, and the practice of police 'closing ranks'. Aside from the aforementioned criminal and unlawful acts perpetrated by police against sex workers, our dataset included 13 further instances where police officers had been involved in criminal activities, such as participating in organised crime through human trafficking or drug smuggling rings.

POLICE AS PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

In the course of our interviews, we asked research participants whether they had ever experienced physical or sexualised violence; been threatened, coerced, or blackmailed; or experienced emotional abuse or harassment from police. 28.2% had experienced physical violence; 26.6% had experienced sexualised violence; and 42.1% had been subjected to threats, coercion, or blackmail at the hands of police. Almost 69% had suffered emotional abuse and harassment from police.

FIGURE 12: POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS



Out of 190 participants asked, 146 (76.8%) had experienced at least one of the above-mentioned forms of police violence. 68.5% of those 146 participants were exposed to multiple forms of police violence. The different forms of police violence against sex workers are discussed in-depth below.

FIGURE 13: POLICE VIOLENCE BY TYPE/FREQUENCY

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

28.2% of all participants had experienced physical violence from police (n=188). Sex workers participating in our research were subjected to police violence in various contexts, including routine patrols, raids on sex work venues, during arrest and detention, and while reporting violence and abuse they experienced at work. Those who work in the open scene, trans women, and those in criminalised contexts experienced more forms of physical violence than other participants.

Incidents of physical violence included: being pushed (6 participants), dragged (4), hit (12), beaten (15), grabbed by the hair (1), restrained, e.g. with zip-ties (2), beaten with objects (1), punched (4), choked (11), pinched or slapped (12), kicked (3), pinned to the ground or otherwise immobilised (3), tortured (4), grabbed (4), thrown to the ground (1), shot (1), or having bones broken (2).

Physical police violence was experienced by participants in all legal contexts under study, including by 40% working in criminalised contexts and 37.9% of those working under partial criminalisation. Rates of physical police violence were lower but still significant in Swedish model contexts with 17.9% and under regulation with 27.4%.

→ SEE TABLE 10 IN THE APPENDIX FOR A BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA ON POLICE VIOLENCE BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS.

> **They used to take us to the police station, and when I was detained, I called one of my friends for help. I remember someone coming and severely beating me for calling my friend. Then they sent me to the hospital because of the beating, and that officer ordered them not to let me out, even if it was revealed I was not guilty. Maybe he wanted to beat me more.**
>
> Narine, Armenia

> **I told them that they have no right to search me, that I would like them to call a woman officer to perform the search. He insisted on doing the search, but I said that I will not allow him to touch me. He slapped me for this. I even reported this at the police station, but they didn't do anything.**
>
> Dijana, North Macedonia

> **They only picked us up and took us to the station. They cuffed my hands behind my back. They pulled my pants down to humiliate me. I was screaming for help, but they grabbed me by the throat so I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe anymore, I couldn't scream anymore.**
>
> Thierry, France

32.8% of migrant participants and 30.8% of non-migrants had experienced physical police violence. A much greater difference could be observed between the experiences of cis and trans women (the latter accounting for a quarter of our sample), with 23.4% of cis women and a whopping 51.2% of trans women having experienced physical police violence. 50% of cis men participating in our research have also been subjected to physical police violence. With 27.3%, the rate was smaller for trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants.

> **She tackled me to the ground, and there were five police officers on top of me, putting a knee on my throat. They held me and I was trying to say that I could not breathe. They were pinning down my arms and legs, and I couldn't move. I am very small and thin, and with five police officers on me, I was having trouble breathing. I tried to get up, to tell them, but they just wouldn't move.**
>
> Chouchou, Belgium

Police violence was more prevalent in outdoor contexts. 30.6% of those working in the open scene had experienced physical violence, compared to 23.8% of those working in closed scene settings. Participants with experience of working in both closed and open scene contexts had been subjected to the highest rates of violence (57.1%). For example, Mia described physical violence in the context of a police raid she experienced when working in the open scene.

> **When they managed to catch us after chasing us, they were beating us a lot. While in the cage, they were beating us even harder, because we dared to react.**
>
> Mia, Greec

39.7% with experience working for third parties had been subjected to physical violence, compared to 29.1% working independently.

SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

The breadth of sexualised harassment and violence experienced by our research participants is unsettling. 26.6% of participants experienced sexualised violence by police officers (n=188). Instances of sexualised harassment and violence occurred in all countries under study, with the exception of Switzerland.

We documented various forms of sexualised harassment and violence, including attempts to procure services[14]; threats or attempts (successful or otherwise) to coerce sexual acts; arrests or fines due to refusal to have sex with officers; using 'welfare checks' as guise to sexually assault sex workers; officers making comparisons to ex-girlfriends and insinuations that they had perpetrated domestic violence; digital penetration under the guise of searching for drugs; domestic violence (including rape) by serving police officers; entrapment, in which undercover police had sex with participants and arrested them after the officers climaxed; forcing workers to expose themselves; forcing unprotected sex; rape and group rape; invasive and unlawful body searches; stares

14 For example, suggesting they would return as clients after work.

and disquieting facial expressions; taking photos of participants without their consent; groping and touching without consent; incidents of sexual humiliation; innuendos; theft of underwear; sexualised comments about workers' appearances, work photographs, or advertisements; sexualised assault; and sex trafficking and forced labour.

At 40%, participants in criminalised contexts experienced greater levels of sexualised police violence than those in other contexts, including 32.1% in partially criminalised settings, 18.5% in Swedish model contexts, and 16.9% in regulated environments.

→ SEE TABLE 10 IN THE APPENDIX FOR A BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA ON POLICE VIOLENCE BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS.

28.4% of non-migrant participants and 20.6% of migrants had experienced sexualised violence. Once again, a much greater difference could be observed between the experiences of cis and trans women, with 44.2% of trans women and 23.6% of cis women having experienced sexualised violence. 20% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants had experienced sexualised police violence.

At 27%, a greater portion of participants working in open scene settings had experienced sexualised violence, compared to 22.8% of those working in closed scene settings. Participants working in both closed and open scene settings experienced the highest rates of sexualised violence (37.5%). There was also a difference between those who worked independently (25.2%) and those with experience working for third parties (30.4%).

Some of the most common and prevalent forms of sexualised violence and harassment were sexist and sexualised comments made by on-duty police officers during routine identity checks, interventions, and raids in sex work venues. This included offensive gestures and comments on sex workers' work, appearance, advertisements, or photos.

> **One time, I swear, this cop had his legs open with his hand on his balls, on his dick.**
>
> Anonymous, Netherlands

> **A police officer said, "Wow, these photos... You are fine! You've got nice curves! Wow..." They told me it was necessary to take a photo of my front and profile. And they said, "Yeah, but we still wanted to photograph you a little bit further down." They didn't have the right to do that. I felt humiliated.**
>
> Louise, Belgium

> **They'll drop lines like, "Oh, there's no wonder you do all of this" and they're laughing and joking. And then one time, one police officer turned around to a Brazilian woman saying "You're a bit fucking old to be doing this, you should be hanging up your stockings". I'll never forget that. I thought, you cheeky bastard, you don't know that woman's circumstances. But you can't say anything, and I just wanted to get out of there. For weeks after that, I felt awful.**
>
> Rita, UK

> **They stop us when we come into work: "How's business? Do you have work? How do you suck someone off? How do you do this or that? Will you come suck me off?" They would laugh at us. They will have females with them in the cars, their female co-workers, and they would also fuck with us [ridicule us]. They will stop us on the corner and ask us how we fuck, how we do things, if it hurts, if it doesn't hurt. There is no justice here, there is nothing. They don't see us as people.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

One of the participants told us about a situation in which a police officer had stolen her underwear during a search.

> **I once had in my bag a little nighty and little panties, too. I had all that kind of stuff there in my bag. It disappeared. I saw that he was rummaging through my bag in a side room. I was told that I would get them back at the exit. But when I got to the exit, they had disappeared.**
>
> Chouchou, Belgium

During raids or sting operations, police officers usually refuse to let sex workers clothe themselves. In the course of a raid, Marina was made to sit only in her underwear. One of the police officers photographed her without her consent.

> **So, they made me remove the robe I was wearing, so I was just in my underwear but not even a bra. I just had to stand there in front of them. It was distressing, and they were all men, but you cannot protest because you are scared. One of the police guys said he needed to make a call and moved to the other side of the room, and I knew exactly what he was doing. He pretended to text someone and was very obviously taking a photo, and then I saw this was true in the reflection of the mirror.**
>
> Marina, UK

During a raid of her apartment in Sweden, Sandra was not allowed to put her clothes on, although she did not pose a physical threat to the group of male police officers.

> **All this time I was sitting in my underwear while they stomped around my apartment in their uniforms and took photos of everything. It felt humiliating.**
>
> Sandra, Sweden

Prolonged nudity is a recognised form of sexualised torture, an act of degradation and humiliation aiming to negatively affect personal integrity, self-esteem, and pride (Vorbrüggen & Hans, 2007). It has been documented as widespread in other contexts, such as with refugees and asylum seekers at Europe's borders (CoE, 2023).

Several participants were forced to remain naked during police operations in their workplaces. Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (Prohibition of Torture) considers such treatment to be "degrading when it humiliates or debases an individual, showing a lack of respect for, or diminishing, his or her dignity" (CoE, 2022: 9). Rosa, working in the open scene, was regularly stripped naked by the police in public and in severe weather conditions.

> **Most of the time, I was brought far out of town, stripped naked to amuse police officers, and forced to walk back by myself, sometimes at night and in severe weather.**
>
> Rosa, Poland

The police also forced a participant in Switzerland to strip naked on the street.

> **I was not treated well. I was accused of something I didn't do. They searched me in the street and stripped me naked, and they shouted at me that I was carrying drugs on me. In other words, I was treated very badly. They did the same to a colleague. I don't think it's right that they strip you naked in the street, take your bag, throw everything on the ground in front of everybody.**
>
> Anonymous, Switzerland

Other incidents included police coercing sex workers into sexual intercourse or other sexual acts during routine patrols, raids and sting operations, or upon arrest and detention. Instances of rapes by police were reported by 20 participants in 8 countries under study. Five participants in 4 countries were subjected to group rape by police. Five other participants told us about situations in which they were coerced to have sex with police officers to avoid arrest, fines, or deportation, or to be granted 'protection'.

> **On the second day when I started working on the street, a policeman came up. He told me that I had to get in the car. I got in the car and he said, "Either you show me your papers or you have to give me sex." It was like a threat, [...] it scared me. I remember that I had sex in the patrol car and near a lemon tree with a policeman in uniform, in a forced way, so that I wouldn't be deported to my country, as he told me.**
>
> Rosa, Spain

> **The abuse of power – I have heard of incidents where during sweep operations, police gathered girls in detention centres and told them, "Give me a kiss if you want me to let you leave". This has never happened to me, but it reminds me very strongly of the power these people have in this position, and the power they have over our bodies and how arbitrarily they can use it.**
>
> Aris, Greece

> **There is a policeman who, if we don't do what he asks, for example, pardon my language, if we don't suck him off, he won't leave us in peace to work. He will take us to the station and lie that we stole or did some other shit. We have to suck him off, so that he will leave us be. He even does this when in uniform. He comes here quite often. And even when we go in to complain, they don't see us as human beings. They chase us away and harass us, saying: "Come on, you are accustomed to this."**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

> **They demand sexual intercourse from me. It is this harassment with the traffic police. Every time I drive somewhere, the traffic police stop me and notice that I am a sex worker. From their behaviour it is already clear that they want sexual relations with me, not for money but free of charge. I have to yield to them and have sexual relations with them.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

> **They took me to my apartment, and there were many policemen who had their guns on the table. Two or three of them did 'that job' [rape] on me; forcing me to give them blowjobs and fucking me. I reported them to the police station purposefully, because I felt violated. The people from HOPS [Healthy Options Project Skopje] helped me a lot and took me to forensics to get samples, but I don't know what has happened since then.**
>
> Lile, North Macedonia

Several sex workers also told us about instances in which police officers posed as clients or came as clients and used their position and power to coerce unprotected sex, lesser pay, or services that sex workers would not provide otherwise. We explore this in-depth in the section 'Cops are clients'.

In our research we documented 3 cases of police involvement in trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced sexual labour. We will not go into greater detail to protect the identities sex workers who were victimised by police officers.

THREATS, COERCION, OR BLACKMAIL BY THE POLICE

One of the major findings of police violence concerns threats, blackmail, and other forms of coercion. This was particularly prevalent, with 42.1% of participants stating they had experienced some form of threat by law enforcement (n=178).

As many as 54.2% of participants in Swedish model contexts had been threatened by police. The rate of threats, blackmail, and coercion was also considerably high in partially criminalised contexts (50.9%) and under criminalisation (40%). The rate in regulated contexts was somewhat lower but still substantial (26.7%). While the percentages presented here differ somewhat, they do indicate that the respective legal regimes do not diminish this particular form of police corruption and violence. In fact, this research found that an increased presence of police encounters results in an increased risk of experiencing threats, coercion, or blackmail.

Among our participants, 35% of migrants and 47.3% of non-migrants had been threatened, coerced, or blackmailed by police, an experience shared by 46.6% of cis women and 34.2% of trans women. 45.5% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants had been threatened by police, a considerably higher rate than among cis men (25%).

When looking at participants' work settings, there was only a small variation in the rates of threats, coercions, or blackmailing incidents. 40.2% of those working in closed scene settings had experienced this form of violence, compared to 41.2% of those working in the open scene. A slightly higher percentage of participants with experience of working both indoors and outdoors were subjected to threats, coercion, or blackmail by police (56.4%). Two out of three participants working under management (66.7%) had experienced threats by police, compared to 32% of independent workers. This difference can be attributed to harsh criminalisation of collective and managed workplaces across different legal settings.

→ **SEE TABLE 10 IN THE APPENDIX.**

In many instances, threats and blackmail by police were used to force sex workers to comply with officers' demands. Threats of arrest were very common across different legal contexts. Sex workers working in criminalised and partially criminalised settings and those operating in the open scene were particularly exposed to such threats by police officers aiming to displace them into more remote or dangerous locations. Additionally, several participants working in the open scene in Greece, where sex work is regulated but only allowed in state-licenced brothels, were threatened with arrest when patrolled or detained.

> **They'd say, "If I find you here again, and every time I find you, I'll take you in."**
>
> Katerina, Greece

> **There was kind of a threat when I was released from the police station. As I was getting out, they said, "If we see you around here again, we're not going to go easy on you, because it's illegal what you're doing". If I would work in this place again, I wouldn't get away with it, next time they caught me.**
>
> Billy, Greece

Other things leveraged against participants, if they did not comply with officers' demands, included threats to disclose their sex working status (publicly or to their family members and other people) or threats to have their children removed. Also common were threats of beatings in order to make participants compliant. Several participants working in Sweden and France were threatened with eviction, with police officers implying that they would inform sex workers' landlords or landladies, or charge them with procuring. In their threats, police also often used participants' migration status to coerce cooperation or discipline them. Carolina quoted a police officer whom she dared to challenge.

> **"Don't talk to me like that. I can take you to jail, you will be arrested. I can even send you back to your country."**
>
> Carolina, Spain

Threats and blackmail were often used to coerce participants into cooperating with the police or to become informants. For example, the police used threats in an encounter with Athena, who worked in an unlicensed brothel in Greece.

> **In a brothel that we had, they threatened me that if I didn't cooperate, in the sense of giving money or saying that I knew any traffickers of women, they would arrest me every day. And they did.**
>
> Athena, Greece

Violence in the form of threats included coercing participants to have sex with clients in a particular area, so that police could catch them and extort money from these clients. Along with her colleagues, Dingtang was forced into soliciting clients, so that they could arrest them to fill their quota of arrestees for that day. Otherwise, they would be patrolled and ID-checked by the police.

> **"It was after the penalisation of clients, like 2 or 3 years ago. An officer came, because he knew the girls, and said, "Go try to turn a trick with that client, so I can take a picture and note his identity. If you do that, we can stop for today."**
>
> Dingtang, France

While participants like Dingtang were forced by police to have sex with clients, others – as mentioned in the section above – were coerced into having sex with police officers. Some participants were expected to provide police officers with sexual services free of charge on a regular basis, with threats of arrest or violence used to coerce them. On occasions where participants refused the sexual predation of police, they were beaten, threatened with graphic violence, and pushed into more vulnerable working conditions.

> **"They wanted me to have sex with them, but I refused. They threatened me that they would tie me to the car and drag me.**
>
> Anonymous, North Macedonia

Threats and blackmail were also used to extort money from sex workers. We discuss this in more detail in the section on extortion of money.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

UN Women defines emotional abuse as "belittling, humiliating, or undermining an individual's sense of self-worth/self-esteem (e.g. constant criticism, verbal insults and name-calling, etc.)" (UN Women, 2010). Human Rights Watch have documented abusive police practices in countries like France (HRW, 2020), and the overall mistreatment of marginalised groups is extensive. Emotional abuse and harassment form part of this, often being a type of ill-treatment that is more difficult to prove than, for instance, physical injuries that leave visible marks (which is not to argue that police are held accountable for these forms of violence). Accounts of emotional abuse appear throughout this research report, and such abuse was often a precursor to physical violence or other forms of mistreatment.

68.7% of participants (n=182) experienced emotional abuse and harassment by police, including insults, slander, and swearing; rudeness, contempt, and hostility; as well as humiliating, mocking, or making fun of participants. Emotional abuse often involved whorephobic, transphobic, sexist, and racist remarks.

They commented on my appearance. For example, one said, "Good breasts" but another said, "But she's a fat whore".

Anastasia, Poland

They took our IDs and then one started to laugh and said, "Oh, looks like we have a couple of ladyboys in tonight. Who wants to take these?" So a couple of guys asked me to go to another room, and I said I wanted a woman officer there, but they said no, because I'm a man. I said, "Sir, my ID has not been changed but I am a woman, you can see this and I am not comfortable in this situation". And the guy that was laughing said, "Prove it, you might have a nice pair of tits but show us what you've got down there or I'll check you myself." He also asked, "Do clients know you're a man? Does your boyfriend know?" The officers also made offensive jokes and sexist, transphobic, and racist comments, saying things like, "So it was like he ordered a Thai bride and got more than he expected?" or "Just so you know, love, I wouldn't return you, I'd just turn you over."

Mali, UK

The police treated us disrespectfully and cruelly, with rude words and manners.

Amira, Armenia

They haven't insulted me like that directly, but they look at me like I'm a piece of trash.

Rosa, Spain

I have experienced a lot of abuse and harassment from the police. Things like them mocking me, calling out my name, and generally being very harassing.

Jessica, UK

They don't have any manners when they're dealing with sex workers. They curse at you and harass you. They don't see you as a person, as a woman.

Anonymous, North Macedonia

The police officer treated me like I was less than nothing.

Mathéo, Belgium

Emotional abuse and harassment were widespread in all countries and legal contexts under study. 81.8% of participants working in Swedish model contexts had experienced emotional harassment, followed by 75.4% in partially criminalised contexts, 70% in criminalised settings, and 57.1% in regulated contexts.

79.6% of those working both independently and under management had been emotionally abused by police, compared to 64% of those working exclusively independently. 69.7% of those working in closed scene settings had experienced such abuse, compared to 57.1% of those working in the open scene. As many as 80% of sex workers working both indoors and outdoors had been exposed to emotional abuse by police.

91.7% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants had been emotionally abused by police. 78% of trans women, 63.5% of cis women, and 71.4% of cis men had experienced emotional abuse by police. While we did not record variations depending on sexuality, participants' migration status played a significant role, with migrant sex workers reporting, somewhat surprisingly, lower levels of emotional abuse by police (59%) than non-migrant workers (73.7%).

→ **SEE TABLE 10 IN THE APPENDIX.**

Participants noted a general feeling of contempt. Police actively insulted many of our participants, or, more insidiously, ignored them when they needed support. The failure of police to intervene will be explored later in this report.

STIGMATISATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN POLICING

> **Because of stigmatisation, you're not safe, neither with ordinary people nor with the police. So, anyone can hurt you.**
>
> Chumina, Spain

ESWA's previous research on stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings explored the importance of cultural understandings of stigma that "shift focus away from stigma as an individual trait and emphasise its structural nature" (ESWA, 2023: 6). We understand stigma to be "a social process that operates on multiple levels of society in a cyclical manner" (ESWA, 2023: 6). Stigma is produced from power dynamics in society that form hierarchies, such as those based on race, gender, class, and colonialism, and their respective relationships to capitalism. We can trace the development of sex work stigma back to these power structures and the ways that "institutions, communities and individuals [...] operate to enforce social norms and structures" (ESWA 2023: 6).

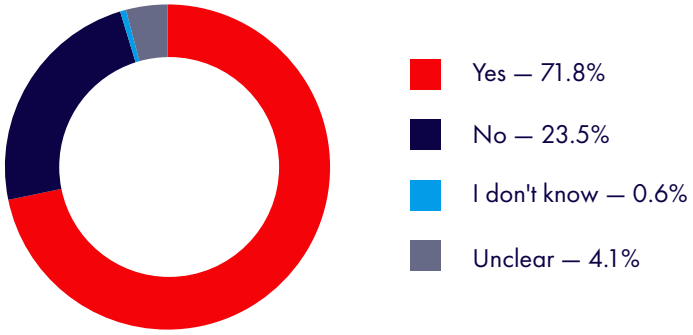
> **This stigma is moral, which is psychological. It's intangible, but it's there, and it kills. It kills.**
>
> Rose, France

Due to their work, sex workers experience high levels of stigmatisation and ensuing discrimination. The impact this has on sex workers' physical, mental, and social health as well as on their social and financial situations has been well documented (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; ESWA, 2023; Kellie *et al.*, 2020; O'Neill & Jobe, 2022; Stardust *et al.*, 2021). Research has also shown that stigmatisation plays a key role in shaping sex workers' interactions with police and their access to police protection and justice (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Cambell & Sanders, 2021; Felih 2017; Klambauer, 2018; Krüsi *et al.*, 2016; Sprankle *et al.*, 2018; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Ślęzak, 2023).

This section of the report outlines participants' experiences in which the stigma attached to sex work, and other factors, led to discriminatory treatment by police. This research found that sex workers experience multiple forms of stigmatisation by law enforcement officials, contributing to a large body of literature that demonstrates the adverse effects that stigmatisation has on sex workers (ESWA, 2023). The stigmatisation and severity of discrimination faced by sex workers are compounded by other aspects of their identities, such as race, gender, age, and HIV status, among others. These intersectional dynamics affect sex workers' experiences with police. Participants with intersecting identities expressed that they experienced greater levels of discrimination by police.

71.8% of participants asked had experienced some form of discriminatory treatment by police, and references to stigmatisation and discrimination appeared over 400 times in the interview transcripts.

FIGURE 14: POLICE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SEX WORKERS



Sex workers working under partial criminalisation and in Swedish model contexts; those operating under management; as well as trans and queer sex workers were particularly exposed to discriminatory treatment. The stigma attached to sex work (in combination with other identity markers) greatly impacted participants' interactions with police. These experiences were so prevalent that what we present in this report should not be considered representative of the scale of the issue.

→ SEE TABLE 11 IN THE APPENDIX FOR A BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA ON DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT BY LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS.

Through this research we found several forms of stigmatisation and discrimination, including sex work stigma, homophobia, transphobia, mental health stigma, misogyny, racism and xenophobia, ableism, classism, HIV stigma, substance use stigma (narcophobia), and stigma related to criminal activity or for having a criminal record.

SEX WORK STIGMA

> **You are vulnerable when you are seen as a criminal or as a social outcast and easy to abuse.**
>
> Marina, UK

As already noted, 73.9% of participants pointed towards harmful and detrimental perceptions of sex workers as one of the key factors adversely affecting their interactions with police. We have also shown that stigmatising and derogatory constructions of sex work and people providing sexual services contribute to high levels of emotional abuse and harassment by police; 125 of our research participants were exposed to rude, humiliating, and judgemental treatment by police, including being insulted, slandered, or mocked. Our research also shows that the stigma attached to sex work fuels discriminatory treatment against sex workers in the context of everyday patrolling and routine ID checks, law enforcement interventions, and while participants were seeking help and reporting violence.

Different forms of police discrimination that participants experienced due to their engagement in sex work included assumptions that automatically guided police interactions; dehumanisation and victim blaming; treating sex workers as criminals or as a threat to society; as well as ignoring sex workers' lived realities and considering them as unworthy of protection.

Many participants reported that police officers had treated them as undeserving of basic dignity, unworthy of protection, or with disgust. They experienced police treatment as degrading and stripping them of their humanity.

> **They treat you like cockroaches. They think you are disgusting, repugnant, a worm.**
>
> Vanessa, Spain

> **When the police officers stop you, they don't even ask you many questions. They go straight to the point. They start treating you like shit because they already have in their head that this is the type of treatment you deserve.**
>
> Eva, Switzerland

Being treated 'like shit' by the police was seen by many participants as a direct manifestation of the sex work stigma constructing them as public nuisance, threat to society, or social ill.

Additionally, many felt that the police treated them like outcasts or criminals, as if engaging in sex work implied they also engaged in criminal activity, or as if providing sexual services was in violation of the law. Strikingly, this happened regardless of the respective legal contexts, for instance, in Poland or the UK, where sex workers are not directly criminalised or penalised, or in the Netherlands, where sex work is regulated.

> **Police judge us. They just view you as a criminal. They think that trouble is coming with you.**
>
> Mandy, UK

> **So being a sex worker, imagine, the police don't look at you with a good eye, because they treat you like a criminal. Like shit. Like the scum of society.**
>
> Catalina, The Netherlands

'Being treated like a criminal' became shorthand for participants to explore how police behave towards them, indicating the ways that criminals – a stigmatising and morally loaded notion – are approached with suspicion and hostility, and as if they were sub-human. The association of sex work with criminality – and the legislative frameworks that connect them – leads to the assumption that all sex workers are untrustworthy and immoral.

Moreover, several participants felt that by being perceived as criminals or troublemakers, as indicated by Mandy, they were automatically assumed to be perpetrators of crimes or wrongdoings, when their working status was disclosed while they were subjected to policing or tried to report violence against them.

> **As soon as he knew we were at the hotel, he understood that I was a sex worker, so that made me the thief.**
>
> Ana, France

> **We're just seen as some kind of criminal group from the start. Like when they come to the club, we're treated as if we are thieves or our work in general is something bad.**
>
> Zuzia, Poland

This research shows that being treated like a nuisance or criminal rather than an individual worthy of protection significantly impacts sex workers' interactions with police when they are victimised, need help from law enforcement, or seek access to justice. Participants discussed situations in which they tried to report violence or other incidents but were not believed or listened to due to the stigma attached to sex work.

> **It's his word against mine, and obviously no one will believe the whore. It's like that. No one will believe the whore.**
>
> Sasha, France

Many participants noted that being known to police as sex workers significantly hampered their access to justice, because they were immediately dismissed by police.

> **I practically just said that phrase ["I'm a sex worker"] and automatically the whole protocol changed.**
>
> Gatita, Spain

The change of protocol, mentioned by Gatita, involved not only sex workers' treatment as distrustful or unworthy of being listened to but also being blamed for violence perpetrated against them. The assumption that sex workers are to blame for assaults they experienced – as they provide sexual services and hence are considered as having put themselves in harm's

way – was widespread across different countries and legal models under study. Moreover, violence, harassment, and mistreatment were seen as part and parcel of sex workers' job, i.e. as 'professional risk' or 'occupational hazard' they were expected to bear. The following interview excerpts demonstrate the scope and prevalence of victim blaming experienced by sex workers when reporting violence or seeking help.

> **Of course they insulted me. They said, "You're a street walker, so why do you feel bad when people suggest such things?" Most of the time people come in a drunk state, clients are under the influence of drugs, and they say very unpleasant things out loud, and it has nothing to do with the fact that it is our work. We should be respected, too. [...] I was just told that it is my fault and that I couldn't file a complaint anywhere.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

> **The police officer was telling us about professional risks and we replied, "In which profession is there a chance that someone will stab you in the stomach?"**
>
> Aspen, Poland

The belief that victims of sexualised crimes are to blame for their assaults is prevalent and well documented in academic literature (Patri *et al.*, 2023; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Participants connected the discrimination they experienced to social views about how women are expected to behave, and that sex workers, or 'promiscuous' women, are to blame for any sexualised violence perpetrated against them. An overall culture of victim blaming emerges from misogyny, sexism, racism, and transphobia (amongst others) that construct certain victims as not valid and deserving, but rather as responsible for the sexualised violence to which they are subjected. It also proved to be the foundation for how sex workers were treated by police after being sexually assaulted. Participants consistently encountered attitudes from police that they could not possibly be considered victims.

> **If somebody reporting sexual violence or rape who is, you know, in their eyes, a squeaky clean fucking teaching assistant for God's sake, doing public service just like them, is not believed, then what hope is there if I say, "Well, I'm a sex worker"?**
>
> Ellis, UK

As Ellis expresses, the link between sexism and whorephobia – what victims are 'squeaky clean' and therefore deserving of justice, support, compassion, and care, and what victims are not – significantly affects police behaviour towards sex workers and their rights as victims.

Similar concerns were also raised by others. Maria believed that police officers **"don't defend women as much as they should"**, and discussed how even making the initial decision to contact the police is no trivial matter for women.

> **If a woman asks for help it's because she really needs it. We are not going to go to the police for small things or things that aren't serious. We need the police to help us, not to discriminate against us as prostitutes or as women.**
>
> Maria, Switzerland

The notion that people who sell sex are waiving their right to sexual agency is misguided and increases the harms done to sex workers. The refusal to recognise sex workers as people who have the capacity to make decisions about what sexual services they provide makes their refusal of unwanted sexual acts far easier to dismiss and ignore. Hence, stigmatisation breeds a climate in which violent individuals, including police officers, behave with impunity and sex workers' access to justice is curtailed.

Participants named prevalent stigma, discriminatory treatment, victim blaming, and the association of sex work with criminality and wrongdoing as some of the key factors negatively affecting their and their colleagues' relations with police. They also serve as some of the main barriers to accessing justice, as they deter sex workers from reporting crimes committed against them to the police and seeking help through the criminal justice system. Sex work stigma – either experienced, perceived, or anticipated – prevented participants from exercising their rights as victims and citizens. Fear of stigmatisation and discriminatory treatment were also key reasons for participants not to disclose their sex working status when contacting the police.

> **I was not identified as a prostitute. I didn't say I was. I changed police stations so as not to be identified. At my local police station they would have recognised me right away. My credibility, I think, would not have been the same. They wouldn't have believed me.**
>
> Ines, France

> **I don't tell them I am a sex worker, it's impossible to tell them that. Because when I speak with police officers, I think that if I tell them they will put me in prison. They won't help me.**
>
> Mays, Sweden

> **The time I went to report that there was a man who was watching me was a bit strange because they asked me, "How do you know this man? Where do you think he met you?" I didn't tell them I do sex work because I thought they wouldn't take me seriously, and that they would tell me, "Okay, since you do sex work, it is reasonable to have such incidents." I have the feeling that in the eyes of the police such incidents are normalised. They don't see them as incidents of violence that they should go and do something about. So I had to say he's a guy, not a client.**
>
> Aris, Greece

Sex workers being unable to disclose their sex working status to police when reporting crimes is a crucial issue, as it affects the police's ability to solve such crimes. If there are people who specifically target sex workers (as is often the case), police subsequently fail to draw connections between the typologies of victims, despite research showing that serial offenders display patterns of identifiable behaviour when targeting sex workers (Salfati & Sorochinski, 2019).

INTERSECTIONAL STIGMA(S)

> **They are a bunch of homophobes, racists, disgusting, classists, you name it.**
>
> Brigitt, Spain

> **The fact that officers aren't punished prevents me from going to the police to report something, either as a woman, a sex worker, or a human being. Because I know they won't pay attention to me. Not to mention that for a trans woman sex worker, it's ten times worse. If you're also a drug user, it's as if you don't exist anymore. You're trash to them and that's how they treat you. If you're a trans woman sex worker, immigrant, and drug user, you can be thrown into the fire. All of these things together make for a very bad relationship with the police, with no trust at all.**
>
> Mia, Greece

For many like Mia, sex work-related stigmatisation and discrimination were just two among several factors shaping their interactions with police. As already noted, research participants mentioned being trans or queer (56.4%), racialised (48.4%), or migrants (53.2%), or using drugs or alcohol (44.7%) as important reasons behind bad experiences of policing. Different minority statuses and overlapping stigmas negatively affect sex workers' relations with police, making multiply marginalised workers more vulnerable to bad policing. This research shows that sex workers' experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination in the context of policing were exacerbated by intersecting systems of oppression.

RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

References to incidents of structural and interpersonal racism and xenophobia appeared extensively throughout the interview transcripts.

ESWA has previously documented the intersection between racism and sex work stigma, demonstrating how structural racism results in discrimination against racialised sex workers who have to deal with multiple oppressive forces and systems (ESWA, 2022), and how anti-sex work and anti-trafficking laws are intimately linked to anti-immigration laws (ESWA, 2019; see also Agustín, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2010; NSWP, 2022; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Women of colour and migrants are often perceived as sex workers and targeted for raids, fines, and detention. They are also subjected to various forms of abuse from police and the wider public. At the same time, immigration laws help to "legitimise a discourse presenting migrants as potential criminals, cheats and abusers" (Kubal, 2014: 93). Migrant sex workers are also frequently subjected to racial

profiling by law enforcement, including the police. Racial profiling is defined by the European Network Against Racism as "a widespread form of discrimination that violates human rights norms. It refers to the use by police, law enforcement or border guards of generalisations based on race, ethnicity, religion or national origin – rather than individual behaviour or objective evidence – as the basis for suspicion in directing discretionary law enforcement actions" (ENAR 2021: 5). This profiling is made worse in public spaces, as in the case of sex workers working in the open scene (Calderon-Cifuentes, 2021; Carpenter & Marshall, 2017).

This research shows that police officers discriminated against racialised sex workers, abusing their position as law enforcement officials to perpetrate violence and racism with impunity. Discriminatory treatment in the form of insults, ridiculing, and offensive behaviours was a very common experience for racialised and migrant participants. For example, Dingtang, a Chinese migrant working in the open scene, told us that French police in Belleville took the trouble to learn some Chinese to insult sex workers in a language they understood.

> **Sometimes police officers learn the word 'whore' in Chinese and use it to insult us. It's all linked to the police checks, the police sweeps, the repression of prostitution.**
>
> Dingtang, France

Racialised and migrant women who dressed 'provocatively' were met with the same derision usually aimed at sex workers, and treated as if they had low morals. Oftentimes they were also profiled as sex workers and subjected to police mistreatment.

> **I remember I was wearing a short dress with a fishnet and so on, and at first I kind of felt like they were talking about me but I didn't pay any attention to them. Unfortunately, we learn to tolerate police sexism, which I also don't accept as a kind of normality. Right after, I saw them coming towards me.**
>
> Nefeli, Greece

Racialised sex workers also experienced high levels of police harassment, being disproportionately targeted for patrolling, residency and ID checks, fines, and other forms of punishment. When Antonela was visiting a friend for a cup of coffee, she was profiled, taken into custody, and subsequently deported. The police claimed that the fact that she had washed out a friend's coffee cup proved that she was working illegally as a cleaner.

> **I was in my room. The doorbell rang. Three policemen came. They asked me where I had been. I told them I had been at my friend's place for a cup of coffee. They put me in the car and took me to my friend to ask if it was true, to verify that she had invited me for a coffee, and she said yes. I stayed in the car and then they took me to the police station. They detained me all day and later deported me, telling me it was because I was working in the black market, when in fact I had followed my friend's invitation.**
>
> Antonela, Switzerland

The effects of racism, xenophobia, and sexism on migrant women's lives cannot be overstated. They are, in fact, so acute that migrant women cannot even go to a friend's house for a cup of coffee without running the risk of being arrested and deported. This type of disproportionate profiling and subsequent detention of racialised sex workers was widespread throughout the interview transcripts, as were migrant participants' experiences of border violence in general.

Racism is not an issue of individual officers' behaviour or specific practices: it "extends to the very framework of law and policy that governs law enforcement" (ENAR, 2021: 7) and hampers efforts to hold law enforcement officers accountable for human rights violations. The association of racialised and migrant communities with criminality has a longstanding history in Europe. Migrants are used as political scapegoats, with the moral panic around migration provoking a staggering amount of racism and xenophobia across Europe (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2023; Howden, 2016; Savun & Gineste, 2018). Racialised and migrant sex workers are simultaneously perceived as deviant or threatening and as being victimised by third parties, like traffickers or 'pimps'.

> **They always think that Asian people, the Chinese people, are trafficked and do something really bad in this country. That is all that they see.**
>
> Mary, UK

Romani sex workers across Europe also experience high levels of harassment, abuse, and discrimination from police because they are an ethnic minority. As the European Roma Rights Centre explains, they suffer from "collective punishment [which] lies at the heart of antigypsyism", forcing Roma communities to "pay for this stereotype in a thousand different ways as a result of collective punishment by those with power" (ERRC, 2019: 4).

> **I had a problem with a client, and just at the same time the police passed by and I told them. One of the officers pushed me, and they insulted me, saying that I'm Roma and that I can't work here.**
>
> Suni, North Macedonia

> **We were treated very badly. They said, "You are Gypsies." They humiliated us. I'm sure they treated me very differently, because I'm Roma.**
>
> Rashida, North Macedonia

Black people face higher levels of harassment and discrimination in the EU (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2023a, 2023b), and participants highlighted anti-Blackness as a particular problem. Many racialised and migrant participants were not only mistreated but also denied help and support by police when they experienced violence and harassment from clients or the general public. Racism and xenophobia were some of the key factors contributing to the police refusing to provide them with protection, handle their reports, or intervene when they had been victimised.

TRANSPHOBIA

Poor treatment on the basis of gender discrimination was experienced by all trans participants, who made up 29.1% of our overall sample size, with 58 identifying as trans, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. The greatest proportion of trans participants were trans women (46), and so more research is needed into the particular experiences of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming sex workers.

Forms of transphobia mentioned by participants included being insulted, mocked, or misgendered, or having their gender questioned; being treated as a social ill or threat to the public; experiencing overall worse police treatment than cis women as well as violence from the general public; experiencing harassment and sexualised violence; losing housing or being charged higher rents; being rejected by family members and other social support networks; being profiled as sex workers; being beaten; being forced to detransition[15] while in prison due to purported concerns over personal safety; or seeing fellow trans people being killed.

The forms of transphobia, and in particular transmisogyny, that were present in the data mirrors in many ways the stigma attached to sex work. Additionally, due to transmisogyny (Serano, 2021), trans women were, similarly to racialised women, particularly often profiled as sex workers and thus treated with disdain, even if they were not actively sex working at the time.

> **Whenever I travel, almost in any country that you go to, border guards stop you. When they look at your papers, your passport, and you have a male name or the gender marker on your passport isn't aligned with your gender presentation, they treat you as someone who has come there to work. They treat you as a whore. [...] I said, "So a trans woman can't go on holiday?" But that's the problem: transsexuals are always seen as sex workers.**
>
> Catalina, Netherlands

Our data shows that trans sex workers were particularly vulnerable to police maltreatment and abuse. Rates of violent incidents with the police were consistently higher for transgender participants than for cisgender participants. Trans sex workers also experienced higher rates of discriminatory police treatment, with 87.2% of trans women and 58.3% of trans men, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants reporting such experiences.

→ SEE TABLE 10 AND 11 IN THE APPENDIX FOR A BREAKDOWN OF THE DATA ON POLICE VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS.

15 Detransition is a practice of stopping or reversing gender transition. Forced detransition through legal or medical means is a severe human rights violation.

Trans sex workers reported being treated as undeserving or unworthy, and being ridiculed and dehumanised by police. Transphobic behaviours from police included insults, mocking, and misgendering.

> **Whenever they see us on the street they call us men's names. They make fun of us and laugh at us.**
>
> Ángela, Spain

> **Since I'm a trans person, and, for example, if I'm standing on the street, when the patrol police officers approach me, they say, "It is a man", and they address me by my specific name. That's the bad thing, that as soon as they see me, they stop and call out my name. That's why I recently wanted to complain about the patrol police.**
>
> Lilit, Armenia

It was also reported that police sometimes go as far as outing trans sex workers to clients, insisting that they are 'tricking' them; this, in turn, is potentially inciting transphobic violence from clients or passers-by.

> **They spy on us for the clients, say that we are gay, that we are not women. They will tell the client, "Hey, you were with a fag, you weren't with a woman, huh? Go get your money, don't be stupid." This has happened to me many times.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

It was also not uncommon that stigmatisation and discriminatory treatment translated into violent police behaviours, with trans sex workers being beaten by officers during routine patrolling or ID checks.

> **A police officer asked me for my documents, and when I gave them to him he said to me, "You fucking faggot, shut up." I said, "In my documents, it doesn't say 'faggot'." Then the officer hit me. That's when I told him, "You don't have the right to hit me."**
>
> Lilith, Spain

Prevalent transphobia among police was one of the main underlying factors for participants not to report violence and seek help from police when violated. It was not uncommon for trans sex workers to feel dismissed when reporting harassment, violence, or abuse to the police, or being denied any support altogether.

HOMOPHOBIA

Homophobia and general bigotry directed against LGBT people were key reasons why participants avoided the police as much as possible, as Aris explained.

> **What makes it difficult is that you're afraid of getting homophobia in the face, so you don't go out and report it. I think part of it is the homophobia itself and the patriarchal ideas that they have about it. Police will say, "Come on... you're a man, you have to fend for yourself. Why are you crying like a woman?" I'm afraid I'll hear such words.**
>
> Aris, Greece

The link between homophobia and sexism are clearly evident here. 'Crying like a woman' is considered unacceptable for a man like Aris. ESWA (2015) has previously documented the particular violence faced by LGBT sex workers, as have other sex workers' rights organisations (NSWP, 2020; SWAN, 2022). Discrimination of this type was found in all 11 countries under study.

> **If you are lesbian, gay, or trans, then the police always look at you in a very different way than at an 'ordinary citizen'.**
>
> Sani, North Macedonia

Being treated differently than 'ordinary citizens' leaves LGBT sex workers more isolated and lacking protection from homo- or transphobic attacks. This extends to police officers.

> **I have had encounters with police officers who were homophobic and a bit racist.**
>
> Cesibel, Spain

Participants discussed how the police treat LGBT people as inferior, as if they were subhuman.

> **The police in Poland – not all of them, but the majority – are quite ignorant and treat individuals in the LGBT community as subhuman, and I have experienced this myself. So, if a sex worker is also an LGBT person, their likelihood of being mistreated doubles.**
>
> Rena, Poland

This experience is made worse for LGBT sex workers who work in the open scene.

> **We are discriminated against. Because we are prostitutes and trans. We are discriminated against for it all. Nobody looks after prostitutes or gay people in the street.**
>
> Johanna, Belgium

The homophobia experienced by participants from police confirms findings of earlier reports (ESWA, 2021; Grierson, 2023) and points towards a pervasive and systemic character of homophobia in police forces across Europe. This affects how LGBT sex workers are being treated and policed on an everyday basis, and hampers their access to justice, exposing them to discrimination and mistreatment when they seek protection or assistance from police.

DRUG USE STIGMA (NARCOPHOBIA)

The stigma attached to drug and alcohol use, which can be extensive (UK Drug Policy Commission, 2010), was evident in our research findings, both in the ways that police stigmatised sex workers, by assuming they were all drug users or engaging in sex work to support their drug use, and in the ways that participants distanced themselves from substance users.

> **If someone attacks me, the police won't take me seriously. They will say, "You're a drug addict, that's why this happened to you."**
>
> Zorica, North Macedonia

The criminalisation of sex work and substance use has many parallels, including the ways that police target poor and racialised minority communities and protect white, middle-class groups (Harm Reduction International, 2021; International Drug Policy Consortium, 2020).

> **You know, if the same thing I do is done by a white person with a different social status, and not a prostitute, then it's okay. I've seen social workers in Barcelona practice polyamory, smoke joints, and binge beer before going to work. The same thing I did. But they're white and have college degrees. They drank exactly like me, had the same life as me. But I'm the one that got punished.**
>
> Linda, Spain

Substance use by sex workers is also used by police to extort, blackmail, and coerce sex workers, as Lila explains.

> **Sex workers who use drugs are not treated as bad for being sex workers as they are for being drug users. They are referred to as 'narkomanki' [an offensive slur] and forced to expose their dealers.**
>
> Lila, North Macedonia

Participants discussed observing police mistreatment experienced by people who use drugs, demonstrating the importance of inter-community care between sex workers and people who use drugs. Rafaela described how she and other colleagues detained at a police station fought for having medical care provided to a person suffering from withdrawal syndrome.

> **We were yelling at the police. "Look, the kid is sick, they have to go to the hospital now!" And we were threatening, and they saw it, and it made sense that the child had to go. Without our pressure they wouldn't have taken the kid to the hospital.**
>
> Rafaela, Greece

Some participants also mentioned how the effects of substance withdrawal were used by police as a tool of humiliation and dehumanisation. For example, Patrycja described her experiences at 'sobering station' in Poland.

> **When they take you to the sobering-up room, they simply steal your money or anything of value that you have. How many times have I had money in my wallet – I didn't know exactly how much, but I knew I had a lot of money – but by the morning, they had taken everything, and I had nothing. They said they took only enough to pay for the sobering-up station, like 200 złoty. They insisted that all they took were those two hundred złoty, and they didn't know where the rest was. Same with my jewellery, the gold. They said, "There was no gold and you signed here that you had nothing on you." [...] They take me to these stations to humiliate me. I won't get anything to eat or drink. They keep me in a closed room, without a pillow, on a hard plain mattress. No possibility of going freely to the toilet, to drink water, or relieve yourself. [...] They always bully me, I never have any rights. They never let me call someone to inform them that I was detained. They have that obligation but they don't grant me that right. [...] They do it out of spite to show that they have power and that they are somebody. That they rule there, not me.**
>
> Patrycja, Poland

Even when participants were not using drugs themselves, the stigma attached to drug use – and the assumption that all sex workers use drugs – was nevertheless present.

> **There's a perception that it's typical in clubs to provide people with illegal substances, extort money from them, or force them to take loans or anything in that vein.**
>
> Rena, Poland

Noteworthy, the entanglement of the criminalisation of sex work and drug use and the narcophobia prevalent among law enforcement were main drivers of police harassment and violence against sex workers who use drugs. Criminalisation and narcophobia were thus two of the key factors preventing sex workers who use drugs from seeking help or reporting violence experienced at work.

CRIMINAL RECORD STIGMA

As we already noted, oftentimes stigmatising and whorephobic attitudes among police contribute to sex workers being treated 'like criminals', i.e. with suspicion, disbelief, and hostility. Participants who actually had a criminal record were further exposed to discriminatory treatment and harassment from law enforcement officials and others.

Studies have shown that the stigma of having a criminal record directly impacts a person's capacity to access the labour market (Loucks *et al.*, 1998; Rovira, 2019). As Loucks *et al.* (1998: 196) explain, "Punishment for a crime does not necessarily end with the completion of a sentence; the stigma of a criminal record may follow people for years after they have 'paid' for their offence." Rovira's research in Spain (2019: 14) has shown that "former offenders are discriminated [against] in the Spanish labour market as a result of the stigma of a criminal record." Not being able to access alternative (and viable) forms of work because of criminal record stigma (and more specifically, the stigma of having a record with sex work-related charges) makes sex workers more reliant on sex work.

> **I mean, you want to change. But they don't let you change, they don't let you change. Even if you were the prime minister of some country, they're going to go after you because of what you've done before, not because of what you're going to do.**
>
> Florin, Spain

The stigma of criminalisation leads police to unlawfully punish sex workers, excluding them further from society. Officers use the authority granted to them by police institutions to exacerbate sex workers' poverty and marginalisation. This abuse of power can have life-long effects, such as for Tanja.

> **I got a criminal record, and on the back of it, there's a miscellaneous section, and they've written a full page just on what they thought of me. Nothing to do with my criminal behaviour. My probation officer was so shocked. We appealed to the Home Office to have it taken off but they refused. It will be there forever. [...] They wrote about my social services involvement. They even put on there that I had admitted to buying street methadone whilst I was pregnant. That's actually on my criminal record. So if I wanted to go and do voluntary work, or with an employer or whatever, they would read that. It can't be removed because it's not a crime, so the five-year rule regarding a spent conviction doesn't apply.**
>
> Tanja, UK

Serving a prison sentence directly affected the treatment experienced by participants who were victims of crime. For some, their access to justice was immediately revoked.

> **Do you mean compensation? I applied to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board. And I was told because I'd spent time in prison, I was not going to get a penny.**
>
> Susan, UK

When Jenny fell victim to a violent robbery, in which she was assaulted and tied to a chair in her home, the police refused to support her because she had a soliciting record.

> **Because I had a criminal record for soliciting, that was the first thing they brought up. They were not interested in what actually happened during the robbery. The fact that I'd been charged with soliciting, that just seemed to put the answers to everything down for them. So if I hadn't been convicted they might have taken the robbery more seriously.**
>
> Jenny, UK

Stigma and discriminatory treatment based on being marked as a 'criminal' prevent sex workers from accessing justice and being cared for by the police.

HIV STIGMA

The stigma attached to HIV has been well documented (Howard, 2023; European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2023). In combination with the prejudices that sex workers are 'vectors of disease' and a threat to the well-being of society, police automatically treat those living with HIV with suspicion. Jazmin expressed how police began to treat her with suspicion as soon as they discovered her health status. Noteworthy, her HIV status was indicated in her police record and made accessible to any law enforcement agent carrying out an ID check, which is a serious violation of her right to privacy.

> **When the police put my passport details through the machines, they asked me about my treatment because I am a person living with HIV. They automatically knew everything about me and said, "Your pills, are you taking them?" I don't know what kind of information they get just by your name. Everything came up, my whole status.**
>
> Jazmin, the Netherlands

The contempt with which police treat people living with HIV (see Global Network of People Living with HIV [GNP], n.d.) – exacerbated if that person is racialised, trans, queer, or a migrant – gives violent clients more power to escape punishment for violent acts. Such a client had viciously attacked Serena and doxxed her to her neighbours. The client had removed the condom during sex and become physically violent; he was also stalking her and accused her of transmitting HIV. Another man, upon the client's instruction, visited Serena's house (under the guise of being a client) and stabbed her twice. Despite this assault, Serena did not call the police; they only arrived after her neighbours called them when the client returned and was trying to break down the door.

> **I tried to explain how scared I was and showed them the injuries from when the other guy attacked me. But then the officer said, "Your neighbour says the guy today was shouting threats and accusations, what was he saying? What about 'You gave me AIDS, you fucking bitch'? Why was he saying that?" And so the police asked more questions, on and on: Do I have HIV, did he know that, did he know I was trans, is that what's also going on here, was I honest with him? I said, "Even if he did not know these things, what of it? Is it a criminal offence to be transsexual? Does this give him the right to do these things to me?" And the woman officer asked if I had had unprotected sex with him, knowing I had HIV. Then she talked about me taking a test. It was very horrible. The whole experience was very upsetting.**
>
> Serena, UK

The fact that police officers consider it a higher priority to interrogate sex workers who have visible injuries over the false claims of violent offenders reveals deep-rooted prejudices against people living with HIV.

The relationship between HIV stigma, police violence, and rates of HIV are connected. Research has demonstrated that police violence actually increased sex workers' exposure to HIV and other STIs in countries where sex work is criminalised (Platt *et al.*, 2018). This is because the fear of arrests and prosecution renders sex workers more vulnerable to violence and deprives them of access to healthcare and support (Reeves *et al.*, 2017; Crago, 2009).

CLASSISM

The stigma attached to sex work is intimately linked to class and perceived ideas of the low moral worth of those who are considered poor. As noted by several participants, being poor is one of the reasons behind sex workers' bad experiences with police and the discriminatory treatment to which they are subjected by law enforcement. Being believed or seen to be poor affects the ways in which police treat sex workers.

> **They think we are inferior people, of a lower class.**
>
> Valentini, Greece

Our participants discussed being treated like nuisances rather than individuals worthy of protection, and how being a member of the sex-working 'class' makes it more likely for them to be disbelieved or not listened to.

> **If I find myself in the street with 3 or 4 people, let's say some property owners and me, a tenant and a sex worker, it's certain that when I speak, people would listen to me less than to the property owners.**
>
> Doris, Belgium

Classism also intersects with whorephobia including prevalent stereotypes of sex workers being responsible for their economic situation, being 'lazy', or doing 'easy' work. Cristina contested these stereotypes, declaring the resilience and strength that is required to be a sex worker.

> **A lot of people think that life is easy. It's not easy, it really isn't. We learn to be brave and to defend ourselves alone. We learn that nobody should step on us, and that takes time. But yes, we are brave women. And sometimes we say, "We don't need the police."**
>
> Cristina, Switzerland

"COPS ARE CLIENTS": POLICE OFFICERS (POSING) AS CLIENTS

Two crucial findings of this research are that police officers leverage their power over sex workers to coerce sex from them, and that many sex workers meet police officers in the role of clients. Although no specific question about the latter was included in our data collection, 78 (39.2%) participants across all countries under study reported coming into contact with police officers as clients. This included plainclothes officers posing as clients during police operations, off-duty officers visiting sex workers as clients, and both on- and off-duty officers abusing their power to extort sex or money from sex workers or perpetrating violence against them. Aside from these contexts, this section will also explore the phenomenon of clients pretending to be police in order to coerce free or unnegotiated sex from sex workers.

POLICE POSING AS CLIENTS: DECEPTION AND ENTRAPMENT

Thirty-six participants across all countries and legal contexts under study had encountered undercover police officers posing as clients and attempting to procure or actually procuring services as part of policing.

The deployment of undercover officers posing as clients in the policing of sex workers served different aims and took on different forms. It was used, for example, as part of police interventions aimed at 'rescuing' sex workers from presumed coercion and exploitation, or during 'welfare checks', where officers posed as clients to trick sex workers into meetings in order to interrogate them about the duress they were assumed to experience at work. Tyra told us about her very traumatic experience of being deceived by an officer posing as a client, who then exposed her to humiliation and paternalistic treatment. The officer who booked the meeting happened to be Simon Häggström, a law enforcement agent who has forged a successful career by publishing part-fiction, part-biographical novels which depict him as a hero presumably saving people who were forced into prostitution. Red Umbrella Sweden (RUS) have reported that several sex workers in their network have had interactions with Häggström and "no one has had good experiences" (RUS representative, personal communication, 2024).

> **"I got an email from a man and showed up at the address where he said he would see me. I remember I got really scared because he was waiting near the stairs. It was dark and he screamed my work name, so things didn't start off very well. I was so shaken up, because I didn't expect somebody to run around and scream my work name in the dark. I was just shocked. He came very close to me, and I'm not sure but I think that I recognised him from the news or something. I immediately felt, okay, so this is not going to turn out as I expected. He said, "I'm police, and this is how this is gonna go." Then he explained the procedure. I was to follow him to his car, and he was gonna talk to me. He said that I didn't have to be afraid, but I was shocked, and I just stood there quietly. I was**

a bit younger than I was today, and back then I knew even less about my rights and what I could and couldn't do. And I was so blacked out. But I actually found my bearings enough to ask him for his police ID. So I asked him, "Can you prove that you are actually police?" And he did, but it was hard for me to tell if it was a real ID. Anyways, from that point, I thought, okay, so I'm going to do what he says. So I followed him to his car, and when we were there, he said that he wanted to look at my ID. I asked why, and he said that it was because he needed to look up that I wasn't a runaway from some type of home for young people. I didn't want to give him my ID but didn't dare to tell him no. I just did everything he said, but against my will, because I was so afraid. I didn't feel that I had any other option – just walk away, that didn't feel like something I could do. In his car was also a social worker, and after the policeman, Simon, took my ID, he went away for like 50 or 100 metres and was on a call for quite some time. I remember being nervous. I wondered if I was gonna end up in some kind of register, but I wasn't sure. And I was supposed to talk to the social worker. In fact, while Simon was looking me up, she was asking me how I was doing and if I was alright, and I said that I was fine, and that I was doing this work. Then she said to me frankly that, of course, she wanted me to stop doing this work. That made me feel very small, like I wasn't an adult anymore. Because having someone say to you that they want you to stop doing this, it really felt like I didn't know what's best for me. And that was the whole atmosphere in that setting: they came there to see me and could tell me what was best for me. She didn't have the capability to really listen and understand anything else than what she already believed. It didn't matter what I said or did. It was more about what they believed, like I was their target. While I was talking to her, I said things that I thought she wanted to hear, because I wanted to get away from the situation. When the police officer returned, he just gave me my ID back and said something like, "You're not a criminal. Don't worry, we can help you." But he was so cold. I didn't get a good impression from Simon actually. And then, after a while, I asked if I could leave, and they said I could. So I took my things and got away, and I was really shaken up. The whole way they had contacted me, it felt like I was kind of tricked. And it just made me even more reluctant to contact the police, and my relationship with them was not improving. My relationship with them actually worsened. Because that whole experience was so traumatic, and I felt like they had treated me like a criminal. I don't think that was fair. That was the most traumatic experience I ever had in the sex industry. So, yeah, I think I would label it as harassment. They could have done it in another way, especially when it comes to how they treated me, not really like a human being but more as if I was a victim. They were out hunting, and I was the deer. That didn't feel professional or like I was respected.

Tyra, Sweden

This kind of treatment to which Tyra and other sex workers have been subjected is not only deceptive, disrespectful, and ineffective, but it also constitutes a profound violation of their human rights. Rather than enhancing sex workers' safety and well-being, such operations expose them to humiliating and degrading treatment and violate their right to liberty, security, and personal integrity. As noted by Tyra, the use of plainclothes officers posing as clients increases sex workers' distrust of the police, deterring them from seeking help or accessing justice.

Our research found that the use of police posing as clients often also served to monitor and surveil sex workers at their workplaces and collect intelligence about the industry. Participants told us that plainclothes in order to gather information about them and their working arrangements police would cruise outdoor sex work spaces, make bookings at or visit sex work venues, and pose as clients. Plainclothes officers' strategy of deception to get inside sex work venues was common during raids or sting operations aimed at exploitative and non-exploitative third parties or clients. This deprived sex workers of the possibility to shield themselves from police interventions and intrusions into their workplaces and homes.

> **This gentleman in civilian attire arrived at my residence as a client. […] That's when he pulled out the badge. He opened the door, and a police squad walked in. They collected my data. I guess they just wanted to see if there were any third parties in the flat.**
>
> Ola, Poland

> **They did something which is illegal. They called us pretending to be customers, booking an appointment. Once they were half inside the flat, they announced they were immigration, and they didn't ask her if she would allow them to come in. And then at the end of everything they gave her a paper to sign which said that she allowed them to come in. But the paper should be shown to her before they come in. Because if she had seen it before, she could have said no, I don't allow you guys to come in, and they would just have to turn around and leave because they don't have the legal right to come into someone's house without permission. That's not what they are allowed to do.**
>
> Camilla, UK

In many contexts, as indicated by Camilla, operations involving police posing as clients targeted sex workers themselves. The role of plainclothes police consisted of gathering and eliciting evidence that would incriminate participants, for example, for the illegal or unauthorised provision of sexual services, soliciting, or other offences, including undocumented migration.

> **They come in and they usually pretend to be normal customers. Or they pretend to be foreigners and they speak in some made-up language because they can't even manage to learn a few words in the language from the country they're supposedly from. When they pretend to be**

those foreigners, they usually ask right at the beginning some strange questions, and often the first question is, "And is there sex? Is there sex here? And is there going to be sex in this private room?" And I have no idea if they record it or not. But I guess they're just looking for something for which they could somehow charge you right away or have possibly some kind of recording on you that you said something wrong or something that's illegal.

Zuzia, Poland

> **Sometimes they come to you to see if they can go with you, to know if you are really a sex worker. I think the plainclothes ones are more dangerous because you don't know they're cops, you think they are your clients. They want to catch you red-handed if you are a sex worker. [...] I have not been taken by them. But many girls have. Like last week, some girls were deported because they took the police upstairs to their rooms, thinking they were clients.**
>
> Tina, Switzerland

By pretending to be clients attempting to procure services police officers exercised influence on sex workers, inciting the commission of the very offence they intended to punish. Policing strategies that consist of police inciting illicit activities represent entrapment and are considered a problematic and questionable form of policing that should be restricted, as it creates conditions for abuses and rights violations of the subjects involved (Murdoch and Roche, 2013: 78–80). In accordance with a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) the use of evidence obtained through the incitement of criminal acts (via undercover methods), "would expose the accused to the risk of being definitively deprived of a fair trial from the outset" (ECHR, 2008, para. 53–54). This means, in turn, that police entrapment methods aimed at punishing sex workers can be seen as violating their right to a fair trial under Article 6 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Additional breaches of sex workers' rights occur when, as part of such entrapment, police posing as clients engage in sexual relations with sex workers. Undercover officers having sexual relations with members of the public to incite evidence is considered an abuse of human rights, including the right to respect for one's private life and the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment (Investigatory Powers Tribunal, 2022; PSOOL, n.d.). Nevertheless, several participants reported having been exposed to sexual contact with officers performing investigative work or collecting evidence against them.

> **There were two customers who we were sitting with, talking to, and having fun. They were cracking jokes and neither of them claimed to be police officials or anything. They arrived dressed entirely in civilian attire. I'm not sure what they were doing or if they were investigating the area. [...] The next day at work, when a client was there, 10 cops walked in, one of whom I recognised from the day before. And it was a**

huge surprise to me. He had been making normal conversation with me, laughed with me, and touched me. In fact, we had had a lot of physical contact. And then you discover the next day that he's a cop who was only there to inspect the area. It was quite uncomfortable. Just the day before, he had been drinking shots with me at the table and touched me.

Rena, Poland

> **About three years ago, in [location redacted] a policeman posed as a customer. He was touching me, flirting with me, and lying to me so that I would trust him. He touched my body, he touched my tits, he touched my hair, he let me touch his genitals. [...] At that moment he tells me, "We are going to stop here for gas." And he was talking on the phone. Since I didn't understand any Dutch at the time, I was surprised when ten cop cars came, and that was when he said that he was a policeman. [...] They asked me for my documents and asked where I lived, who was forcing me to do these things.**

Jenny, The Netherlands

> **The police officer pretended to be a customer. He was in his underwear and that's how we started having sex. However, during the sex act I was asked unusual questions, like, "At what age did you start giving blowjobs?" or "So for a hundred and fifty euros I can fuck you as much as I want and do whatever I want?" It was a red flag when those questions started. After sex, he showed me a message on his cell phone and said, "Read it." And this message said, "I'm a police officer and I've put money in your bag. Go quickly down the stairs and get out the left exit." I put my clothes on as fast as I could and ran for the exit. Two police officers were waiting for me there. They first asked me for my ID and then said, "We know why you've come here." They told me to open my bag, and they saw the money which was marked. They said that I offered sex in exchange for money and that's illegal, and then they took me to the local station.**

Katerina, Greece

Since the legal definition of rape is sex without consent (CoE, 2011; Zamfir *et al.*, 2024), entrapment operations in which undercover officers initiate sexual contact with sex workers for the purpose of obtaining incriminating evidence should also be considered rape (or sexual assault for non-penetrative sex acts). Furthermore, even if such entrapment operations would be considered technically lawful, they represent an abuse of power. Sex work policing strategies that involve officers posing as clients are hypocritical at best and constitute a serious human rights violation at worst.

OFF-DUTY POLICE AS CLIENTS

> **Yes, there are police officers who buy sexual services too. There are always people in law enforcement and other people in power who buy them.**
>
> Angela, Sweden

> **They usually criticise us but they also come to us; they are two-faced.**
>
> Narine, Armenia

Police also had sex with participants when they were off-duty, visiting them as clients. Twenty-six participants across all countries and legal contexts under study told us about having off-duty officers as clients. We believe this to be a conservative estimate, as our data collection did not include an explicit question concerning this type of police contact.

Sex workers' ability to safely decline an off-duty police officer is questionable. In countries where sex work is criminalised, it is difficult to see how sex workers can decline to see an individual holding such social and legal authority over them. They are also unlikely to say no to officers who can use their power as law enforcement officials to punish them with fines, detention, or deportation, or seek personal revenge, for example, by forcibly outing them to family members. The risk for many sex workers is simply too great, especially for those with a precarious migration status or those who are criminalised in other ways or socially vulnerable, such as mothers.

> **The old cops, those scoundrels. They'd see me there and they'd be like, "How late are you gonna be here?" "Well, until 2, 3 in the morning." And sometimes I had to wait until 2 or 3 o'clock for them to arrive. [...] They ask you whether you want to provide them with services, yes, but because they know that I know that they are policemen, they know that I have to deal with them.**
>
> Vanessa, Spain

POWER ABUSE BY CLIENTS WHO ARE POLICE

> **If the police want to have sex, they will make you do it. They would come in and just want to see a deal. Not paying a penny.**
>
> Connie, UK

Our data revealed that police officers leveraged and abused their power when coming into contact with sex workers as clients. Eighteen participants across 6 countries, i.e. Armenia, France, Greece, North Macedonia, Spain, and the UK, told us about their violent and abusive encounters with on-

and off-duty police. Several described instances in which officers used their position and exploited sex workers' legal vulnerability to extort unprotected sex, lesser pay, or services free of charge.

> **When I was working at the house where we worked, I used to go out with two policemen, and the problem with them is that what they pay is merely charity. There are some who want to get bareback blowjobs. I say if you want a bareback blowjob, yeah, I'll do it with you, but you pay me 80 euros an hour minimum, then I'll do it. "No, but I'm your friend. Besides, I'm a policeman. If you need something, you call me. But I will pay you 20 euros."**
>
> Laila, Spain

> **There were instances when I have given sexual services to police officers who afterwards demanded that I give them the money back, because they are the police and they can arrest or detain me, or out me to their colleagues, etcetera.**
>
> Lila, North Macedonia

> **They threatened me and used my services without paying me.**
>
> Hasmik, Armenia

> **I spoke on the phone with a client, and we arranged where to meet. We met, went into his car, without me knowing that he was a police officer. We went to a hotel and I started doing my job, but I said, "Sir, I would like the payment in advance, because that's how it goes." He said that he can't pay now, he would pay afterwards. After we finished, I showered and was dressing up. I asked, "Sir, you would need to pay me", to which he said, "I could take you to prison for this, because I am the police."**
>
> Dijana, North Macedonia

> **He came to me and didn't introduce himself as who he is. He asked me for a favour, an erotic massage. Finally, to avoid paying for my service, he showed me a police badge. He started threatening me. "Do you know that what you are doing is punishable?" [...] He didn't pay me, I was scared.**
>
> Mimi, North Macedonia

> **I was working in an open scene, and a car stopped by. At first, I didn't know it was a police officer. He asked me about the price, then I got into the car, and when we arrived in front of my building, he told me that he was a police officer and that he wanted a sexual service free of charge. And I had to give him what he wanted for no money.**
>
> Eli, North Macedonia

> **I didn't undergo an identity check, and the cop who took me into his car without paying me, I don't know if he did it within the context of his duties or not. So I can't say a cop abused me in the name of crime prevention.**
>
> Beryl, France

While all the instances above account for rape or sexual assault, they also reveal the ways in which police officers abuse their power over sex workers to manipulate, coerce, and violate them.

CLIENTS PRETENDING TO BE POLICE OFFICERS

The phenomenon of violent clients pretending to be police in order to coerce free or unnegotiated sex from sex workers was mentioned five times by participants in as many countries. The fact that violent individuals are able to use sex workers' fear of the police to blackmail them into unwanted or unpaid sex indicates the harrowing and far-reaching impact of criminalisation and policing.

> **Once, when I first came out and didn't know much, a client told me he was a cop. And I didn't know that he actually wasn't. He was just a client. And for a month we went to a hotel, he wouldn't pay me, and he would afterwards tell me I had to leave because "I'm going to rat you out."**
>
> Katerina, Greece

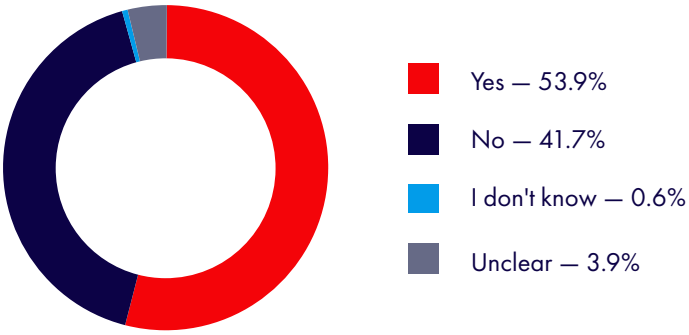
> **Some people have told me things like that, that there are clients who are dressed in civilian clothes and say they are policemen, and they want to fuck them without a rubber.**
>
> Luciana, Spain

> **They tried. They came as clients. They introduced themselves as police. They wanted to get free sex services but I sent them to the appropriate places.**
>
> Khanna, Armenia

POSITIVE TREATMENT BY THE POLICE

Among 180 participants asked, 53.9% reported having had at least one positive experience with the police. Eight out of 97 participants who had had positive experiences with the police noted that they were treated with respect and care when officers were unaware that they were sex workers. Remarkably, 41.7% of participants had never experienced a positive interaction with the police.

FIGURE 15: POSITIVE TREATMENT BY POLICE



Similar to our other findings, participants' responses differed across the different legislative contexts. In criminalised contexts, 50% reported having had at least one positive experience with the police, compared to 56.9% in partially criminalised contexts. In regulated contexts, 51.6% had had at least one positive experience with the police. The highest percentage of sex workers (61.5%) who had had at least one positive experience with the police worked in Swedish model contexts.

Among non-migrant participants, 55.8% had at least one positive experience with the police, compared to 51.7% of migrant participants. 62.5% of trans women had had a positive experience with the police, compared to only 49.1% of cis women. Among trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants, 58.3% had had a positive experience with police, while 55.6% of cis men reported having had a positive experience.

54.5% of participants who work indoors and 55% of those working in both open and closed scenes reported having had a positive experience with the police. However, at 48.4%, the rate of those who worked only in the open scene and reported having had at least one positive experience was slightly lower. Among those working independently, a slightly higher percentage had had a positive experience with the police (55.7%), compared to those working under management (50%).

→ SEE TABLE 12 IN THE APPENDIX.

While using the term 'positive' to describe their experiences with the police did ring true for participants, some of them could be more accurately characterised as neutral. In other words, participants did not experience active harm. We have coded and outlined below the elements that they cited as contributing to their 'positive' experiences.

TABLE 4: POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE

Elements of a 'positive' experience	Explanation
Being taken seriously and treated with respect	Police do not insult, humiliate, or dehumanise sex workers.
Not being stigmatised for being a sex worker	Police treat sex workers impartially and do not use their sex working status against them.
Police officers practising due diligence	Police read participants their rights, announce themselves, and behave lawfully.
Police do not shift tactics with sex workers	For example, if police call in sex workers as victims, they do not suddenly treat them as offenders.
Relationship between sex workers and police is not adversarial	Police stop seeing sex workers as easy targets for harassment and punishment, such as fines, detention, or administrative or criminal charges.
The gender of police officers conducting body searches aligns with sex workers' requests	For example, female police officers conduct searches of trans and cis women.
Sex workers have a witness present when dealing with police	The presence of a witness greatly improves the treatment that sex workers experience and is therefore important for the achievement of sex workers' rights in custody or as victims of crime.
Recognition of sex workers' humanity	Police treat sex workers as human beings with dignity and rights.
Police officers show concern for sex workers' safety	For example, police intervene if someone attacks or harasses a sex worker at work, follow up after an assault, and conduct quick check-ups.

Participants described their positive experiences with police as rare and surprising, revealing the extent of over-policing and the violent nature of their everyday interactions with law enforcement.

> **"There was one case I remember very well, in a detention centre. In my personal life, when officers don't know what I do for a living, I don't see any differences, but when they know I'm a sex worker, I can certainly see a difference. At that detention centre, where I was because I had been caught again in the afternoon, I sat all night until the next noon, when we went to court. Always in handcuffs and accompanied by a policeman in a police car, or in a 'cage' if there were a lot of people. Because it was raining, one policeman, a very young one, opened an umbrella and held it out for me so I wouldn't get wet. [...] It was very moving. In the midst of all the brutality, such a simple gesture seemed huge. [...] Oh, and one time, sorry, I went out on the street again after 25**

years. The first person who stopped in front of me, other than customers I mean, was a policeman in his uniform on a motorbike. I felt a bit awkward and unconsciously started walking backwards. He asked me, "Everything okay?" And I said, "Are you talking to me?" I couldn't believe he was talking to me and, in fact, everything was fine. I asked him, "Did something happen?" and he replied, "I'm going down to the gas station. Do you want me to get you anything from the kiosk?" And just the fact that I didn't start crying, it seemed so foreign, so crazy. I said, "No, of course, I don't want anything, but thank you." And sure enough, every night the policemen passed by without paying any attention to us. They waved or honked sometimes. It's shocking, yes.

Mia, Greece

They didn't harass me.

Mathéo, Belgium

I can't remember much about it, but generally, it was noticeable that they paid attention. There was an incident, and after the police intervened, everything settled down and ended successfully. They were worried about it.

Anna, Armenia

There was a woman police officer who was really caring and informed, for once. She even told me that there was a trans person in her family. Well, she was a woman, so inevitably she had a different sensitivity than a man. The proof of that was that she was a little informed about the subject and was a little less clumsy and rather kind. Because the others were not.

Shanelle, France

I don't know what the younger ones knew, but they never beat me. And they always came to the brothel for check-ups, too, and we had the utmost respect. Not to lie.

Elle, Greece

I know that in Besançon, the police are very cool with sex workers. They are really cool with the street workers, they don't ask them to leave as it happens, for example, in Lyon, I think. So that alone is quite good. I don't know if there was an agreement or if it's the policy, but nobody ever complained too much about the police. At least when you look at the street workers, I think it's going pretty well.

Prune, France

> **I have recently reported a case of violence to the police. They responded quickly. They arrested the man who attacked me, and he is now in jail.**
>
> Zorica, North Macedonia

> **Positive? When I was raped, yes, for me, the treatment was positive, because they arrested him, they had me identify him from behind a tinted window. I recognised him. Yes, the police got involved.**
>
> Rachelle, France

> **The attitude of the woman police officer towards me was very positive, because she simply accepted that I was working like that and treated it as if it was any other job.**
>
> Klara, Poland

> **Everything was human and fair. Overall, it was a really great experience, although I would have expected it to be a horrible experience. I'm sorry, but no. It was actually very positive.**
>
> Maria, Poland

> **I feel that the police treated me very well. There were 5 male police officers, but they were very respectful throughout and treated me like a lady. I felt very comfortable. Honestly, I felt good and respected, while I was undocumented, in prostitution, and trans. And living with violence.**
>
> Jazmin, The Netherlands

DOES THE GENDER OF POLICE OFFICERS MATTER?

There is often an assumption that increasing the number of women in police forces will resolve or mitigate the widespread abuses of power that occur in the context of policing (Denney, 2019). While some participants expressed satisfaction about how they were treated by female police officers, other participants described several instances where female officers abused their power in similar ways to their male counterparts.

A total of 17 participants[16] noted positive experiences with female police officers. Participants highlighted 3 key differences between male and female officers. The first was related to female officers' general conduct and behaviour; the second to how some female officers were more sensitised to issues faced by sex workers, which, in turn, positively affected their treatment of participants; and the third was the direct contrast between female and male officers.

16 This is a conservative estimate, as not all participants were asked about the gender of the law enforcement officials they came into contact with.

POSITIVE CONDUCT AND BEHAVIOUR OF FEMALE POLICE OFFICERS

Being kind, not hostile, caring, cordial, empathetic, understanding, non-judgemental, calm, and non-confrontational; not sexualising participants; putting participants at ease; taking sex workers seriously; protecting participants from violence (including from male officers); exercising restraint in the use of force (e.g. avoiding an immediate or excessive response); expressing concern for participants' welfare.

Conversely, almost twice as many participants (32)[17] noted having bad experiences with police officers who were women. Fourteen of them discussed poor attitudes and conduct from female law enforcement officials, such as showing a general lack of care; being rude, contemptuous, manipulative, dehumanising, transphobic, whorephobic, and racist; and abusing participants with sexualised insults.

> **"In general, the most violent and dangerous ones are the women. Yes, in street work, when you're dealing with the police, the women are a little more violent than the men.**
>
> Mylène, France

Eighteen participants reported experiencing violent or unlawful behaviour from women officers. These incidents included verbal abuse and harassment; theft; sexual assault, including the sexual assault of a minor; threats of being shot; physical violence, including the use of such excessive force that participants' bones were broken.

Some participants felt that female police officers were just as problematic and sexist as their male counterparts, while others believed they were even worse. Another theme that emerged was that female officers were also often ignorant of sex work laws, which resulted in participants being denied access to justice, for example when reporting violence.

While some cases suggest that the gender of police officers can influence and improve the treatment of sex workers, our research demonstrates that increasing the scope of policing and the number of police – regardless of gender – are not effective solutions to the violence experienced by sex workers at the hands of police.

17 As above.

SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCES WHEN DETAINED, ARRESTED, OR TAKEN TO THE POLICE STATION

Given the widespread criminalisation of sex work and the variety of punitive laws used to target sex workers across all regulatory models – including sex work- and non-sex work-specific laws and policies, such as migration and drug policies, traffic regulations, or public morality and public order by-laws – it comes as no surprise that 60% of research participants reported having been detained, arrested, or taken to a police station at least once. It is crucial to note that these figures do not reflect the total number of times they were detained, arrested, or taken to a police station, but the number of participants who came into contact with law enforcement in the context of detention or arrest. Participants were not asked about the reasons behind their detention or arrest, but further research should be conducted into the various laws and policies used to target sex workers for detention and arrest.

In criminalised contexts, 75% of participants experienced higher rates of detention and arrest, compared to those in other regulatory settings, with 66.7% in partially criminalised contexts, 53.7% in regulated environments, and 39.3% in countries with the Swedish model.

58.3% of non-migrants and 60% of migrants had been detained, arrested, or taken to a police station. Once again, a significant disparity was observed between the experiences of cis and trans women, with 53.5% of cis women and 84.1% of trans women reporting instances of detention or arrest. A smaller but still considerable disparity was also observed between cis men (37.5%) and trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants (50%).

A higher proportion of participants working in open scene settings (73%) had experienced detention or arrest, compared to those working in closed scene settings (51.9%). At 73.8%, participants who worked in both closed and open scene settings reported the highest rates of detentions and arrests. There was also a difference between those who worked independently (55%) and those with experience working for third parties (68.9%).

→ **SEE TABLE 13 IN THE APPENDIX.**

ACCESS TO RIGHTS DURING ARREST AND DETENTION

Safeguarding the human rights of individuals involved in criminal and administrative proceedings is a fundamental aspect of the rule of law. Procedural safeguards for the protection of rights of suspected or accused persons have been already laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948). These include the presumption of innocence (Article 11), the right to a fair trial (Article 10), the right to an effective remedy (Article 8), and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile (Article 9).

Furthermore, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) recognises the general right to a fair trial in criminal proceedings in Article 14 (1), while Article 14 (3) further specifies the minimum procedural rights guaranteed to anyone suspected of or charged with an offence (UN General Assembly, 1966). These rights include, among others, the right to information, legal assistance, legal aid, and interpretation.

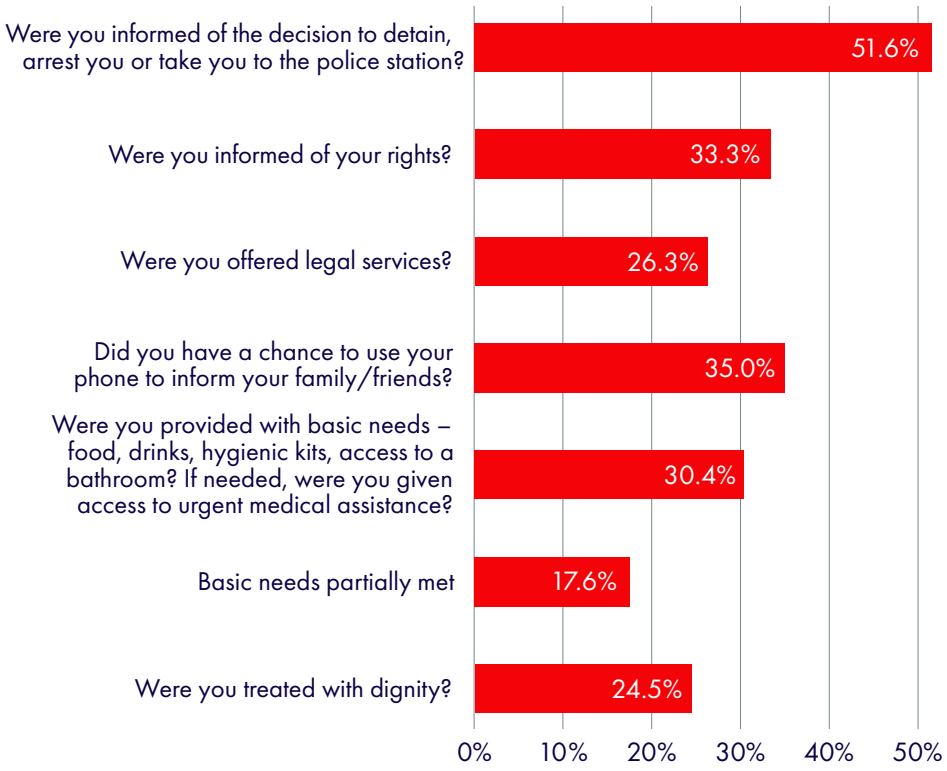
At the European level, the European Convention on Human Rights (CoE, 1950) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EU, 2012a) guarantee the rights of suspected or criminalised individuals. These rights include the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial and defence, and guarantees to safeguard the principles of legality and proportionality of criminal offences and penalties.

Additionally, numerous EU directives have been introduced to safeguard various rights of persons suspected of crimes or subjected to legal proceedings, including Directive 2010/64/EU outlining the rights to interpretation and translation (EU, 2010); Directive 2012/13/EU laying down minimum standards on access to information (EU, 2012b); Directive 2013/48/EU establishing the minimum rules on the rights of suspected or accused persons to access a lawyer, to have a third party informed upon deprivation of liberty, and to communication with third persons and consular authorities while deprived of liberty (EU, 2013); and Directive 2016/343 focusing on the presumption of innocence (EU, 2016). Furthermore, a number of legal instruments ratified by EU Member States acknowledge the criminal procedural rights of vulnerable groups, such as persons with disabilities or third-country nationals (FRA, 2016, 2019).

The minimum standards set by international and EU policymakers guarantee suspected or criminalised individuals the right to information, to have legal representation, to communicate with family members, to legal aid, to interpretation and translation if needed, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and the right to be treated with dignity.

Our data shows that many of our participants who had been subjected to arrest or detention, or were taken to the police station experienced violations of these rights.

FIGURE 16: SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS DURING ARREST AND DETENTION


Were you informed of the decision to detain, arrest you or take you to the police station?
51.6%
Were you informed of your rights?
33.3%
Were you offered legal services?
26.3%
Did you have a chance to use your phone to inform your family/friends?
35.0%
Were you provided with basic needs – food, drinks, hygienic kits, access to a bathroom? If needed, were you given access to urgent medical assistance?
30.4%
Basic needs partially met
17.6%
Were you treated with dignity?
24.5%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%

RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Only 49 of the 95 participants who had been arrested, detained, or taken to the police station were informed of the rationale behind the arresting officers' decision. Being informed of the reasons behind an arrest or detention is crucial not only because it is a fundamental right, but also, as has been demonstrated, because the authority bestowed upon the police enables violent individuals to impersonate law enforcement and perpetrate crimes against sex workers.

When asked whether they had been informed of the reasons for their arrest or detention, some sex workers described their experiences.

> **No. They just said, "Keep your head down and don't say a word."**
>
> Lile, North Macedonia

> **No, not really, not clearly. Eventually I guessed the reasons for my detention. But no, they weren't made clear to me.**
>
> Ana, France

> **At no time did they tell me, "You are under arrest." They took my fingerprints and photos, but they didn't tell me that I was under arrest for having assaulted someone, no. They only said that a lawyer would come to talk to me the next day, which was, in a way, like incomplete information, letting me know that I was arrested but not telling me what I had done or what code applied. Nothing like that.**
>
> Carolina, Spain

One of the key rights granted to suspected or criminalised persons during legal proceedings is the right to be informed about their guaranteed rights. These rights include the right to remain silent as well as the rights to a lawyer, to access case materials, to urgent medical attention, and to challenge their arrest, among others. Out of 99 participants asked, only one third were provided with information about their rights upon arrest or detention. Sixty-one participants were not informed about those rights, 2 were unsure whether such information was provided to them, and 2 received this information on occasion.

Being informed of one's rights is a crucial step in being able to exercise them. Police officers have been accused of regularly providing unclear information or deliberately withholding it from detainees. This practice of deliberately withholding or failing to provide information in a clear and accessible manner is unlawful.

Some participants noted that they received information about their rights solely through a lawyer or a legal advisor provided by community organisations or other non-governmental support services.

RIGHT TO INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION

Being able to understand the information provided is of essential importance for detainees, suspects, and persons in custody. Understanding information not only allows suspected or accused persons to follow legal proceedings and communicate with law enforcement personnel, but also to exercise their rights, including the right to a fair trial and defence. EU principles stipulate that during any questioning, including by police and in all court hearings, as well as during essential meetings between the suspect or accused and their lawyer, interpretation services should be provided free of charge.

Participants were not directly asked about their experiences with interpretation and translation services during arrest or detention, or when taken to a police station. However, our analysis uncovered several instances where participants were not provided with interpretation or translation services. Consequently, they were unable to understand the suspicions or charges brought against them, their rights, or the potential outcomes of their arrest or detention. For example, Tania, Mary, and Mariana were unable to understand charges brought against them and rights granted to them, and meaningfully engage with police officers upon their arrest and detention due to the language barrier.

> **Here in this country Dutch is spoken. When I was in contact with the police the whole procedure was done in Dutch, and I didn't understand very well what was being written, how the complaint was being taken. I explained my situation in English, but the policeman put down in Dutch what he understood, or what he wanted, and I had no control over what was being written.**
>
> Tania, The Netherlands

> **During that time, it was completely unclear to me what was going on. They just quickly said a sentence to me which I didn't understand, about the reasons of my arrest. You know, English is not my first language, and they were speaking English that I didn't understand, like difficult words.**
>
> Mary, UK

> **I was probably informed of various things regarding my rights. They say all these things, but if you can speak some English, you don't get an interpreter, although you cannot understand all these legal words in English. So you end up agreeing to things or signing things because you are scared.**
>
> Mariana, UK

As noted by Mariana, the inability to understand and fully engage with what is going on puts arrested or detained sex workers in a position of vulnerability vis-à-vis law enforcement. This can lead to abuses of power by the police or increase the likelihood of self-incrimination among detainees.

RIGHT TO HAVE A LAWYER AND THE RIGHT TO LEGAL AID

In legal proceedings, the right to a lawyer is a key procedural right of those suspected and accused of offences and crimes. As noted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, "the right of access to a lawyer plays a significant role in facilitating other procedural rights, such as the right of the accused not to incriminate themselves, the right to competent and effective legal advice and the right to have adequate facilities for the preparation of a defence" (FRA, 2019: 38). The right to a lawyer is also considered a key procedural safeguard against ill-treatment during arrest and detention (FRA, 2019: 38). Additionally, suspected or accused persons have the right to be assisted or advised by their lawyer as early as possible, ideally before questioning by the police or interrogation by other law enforcement or judicial authorities.

Only 26.3% of participants (n=99) were informed of their right to legal representation and offered legal assistance after being arrested or detained.

> **To be honest, I would be lying if I said they offered me any legal aid. No, they didn't. We applied to public organisations with our own means.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

> **You cannot get a phone call for a lawyer, you cannot contact nobody. You are in their hands until they finish.**
>
> Sasha, UK

In certain cases, legal services would only be provided conditionally. A participant in Poland, for example, was offered legal services on the condition that she stayed overnight in a holding cell.

RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE WITH RELATIVES OR FRIENDS

35% of participants (n=100) who had been arrested or detained were permitted to use their phone to notify someone about their situation. However, this authorisation was frequently granted only after repeated requests or assertive action by the participants.

> **After arguing for a long time, I was allowed to call.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

When participants were more isolated, they received less favourable treatment from police officers. The possibility to inform someone of their detention and arrest is not only a procedural right (Jourová, n.d.), but it is also crucial in reducing abuses of power and ensuring accountability for police behaviour.

BASIC NEEDS MET

30.4% of participants (n=105) had their basic needs met, including access to food, water, and medical attention. The needs of 17.4% were met only partially; for example, they were given access to a toilet but no food or water. 50% had none of their basic needs met.

The belief that offenders, or those who are seen as offenders, are unworthy of basic human dignity is part and parcel of the carceral logic. For example, some participants were refused medical attention or access to a toilet. Conditions for participants who were detained or imprisoned were frequently inhumane, in some cases amounting to torture. Bulba in Poland was detained in solitary confinement for 3 weeks and refused basic necessities while police tried to force a confession from her. Others were not provided food after 24 hours, but refrained from requesting any due to fear of repercussions.

> **After 24 hours I was starving, but I thought to myself, no, just disappear, be a shell.**
>
> Beryl, France

Several participants in Greece also reported being blackmailed by police officers when they requested to use the bathroom. They were told that they could only use the toilet if they provided sexual services to the officers.

> **In a detention centre that I remember, I wanted to go to the bathroom – not just me, other girls too. They would only let us go, if we gave blowjobs to the officers through the bars. From a certain point onwards, it was a daily routine for them and for us. Some gave in, some peed in the cells on purpose.**
>
> Mia, Greece

> **The cop told me back in the day, "If you want to go to the bathroom, you're going to give me a blowjob." And he showed me his dick right outside my cell.**
>
> Katerina, Greece

BEING TREATED WITH DIGNITY

When participants were asked if they had been treated with dignity when they were arrested, detained, or being taken to the police station, 67.3% said no (n=99). For many, the notion that the police might treat detainees with dignity was laughable. The participants' sardonic answers highlight the antagonistic relationship between sex workers and the police. Other responses further reveal how detentions inherently compromise human dignity.

> **[Loud coughing] Is that a joke? [Chuckle].**
>
> Adda, Greece

> **You get there and they take everything from you. They take everything from you and they let you go in, but now with nothing. How ashamed I felt at that moment. I wanted to be swallowed up by the earth.**
>
> Mònica, Spain

> **Was I treated with dignity? No! Absolutely not. The whole process is designed to degrade you. I do not need to elaborate on that, right? Because it's clear how the treatment was not dignified.**
>
> Marina, UK

> **No, because otherwise I wouldn't have been in the police station.**
>
> Lilly, The Netherlands

Some participants reported mistreatment and discrimination by the police during their arrest and detention, while others spoke of emotional abuse and discriminatory treatment, including slut-shaming and misgendering. Many participants were also subjected to physical and sexualised violence, emotional harassment, threats, blackmail, and intimidation during their arrest or detention. Various violations and forms of violence experienced by sex workers during arrest and detention are detailed in the section on police violence and repression.

SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCES AS VICTIMS OF CRIME

One of the contexts in which sex workers come into contact with the police is when they are subjected to violence, harassment, or other forms of abuse. Our data shows that out of 188 participants asked, 69.1% had interacted with the police at least once as victims of crime. It is crucial to note that these statistics do not reflect the total number of times participants were victimised or experienced violence. Rather, these figures represent only those instances where sex workers came into contact with the police in the context of their victimisation.

The statistics slightly varied across the different legal models. While 75% of participants in partially criminalised contexts had interacted with police as victims of crime, this was true for 71.8% in criminalised environments and 69% in countries following the Swedish model. In regularised contexts, 62.5% had been in contact with the police as victims of crime.

71.2% of non-migrant participants had interactions with police as victims of crime, compared to 62.9% of migrant participants. We can account for this variation by acknowledging that migrant sex workers, especially undocumented migrants, are often reluctant to report crimes (COMPAS, 2019). When they do, they frequently face deportation (Keith & LeVoy, 2020: 4), even when they are victims of human trafficking (La Strada International, 2022).

The 85.4% of trans women who had interacted with police as victims of crime represented a significantly higher figure than the 64.8% of cis women, 66.7% of cis men, and 58.3% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants. This discrepancy likely reflects the increased vulnerability to violence faced by trans women engaged in sex work. The difference was less pronounced based on sexuality, with 66.9% of heterosexual and 70.8% of non-heterosexual participants reporting contact with the police as victims of crime.

67.2% of sex workers operating independently had interacted with police as victims of crime, compared to 76.7% of those with experience working under management. Notable differences also emerged based on work setting, with 52.9% of sex workers working outdoors, 68.6% of those in the closed scene, and as many as 85% of participants with experience in both closed and open settings having come into contact with police as victims of crime.

→ **SEE TABLE 13 IN THE APPENDIX.**

In this chapter we investigate the experiences that sex workers have had when they did interact with law enforcement officials as victims of crimes. Firstly, we examine situations where police officers neglected or declined to intervene and provide assistance to sex workers who were subjected to violence and assault. Secondly, we document instances of mistreatment and harassment experienced by sex workers reaching out to the police for help. Thirdly, we show whether and how the rights of sex workers as victims of crime were upheld when they decided to report the crimes committed against them.

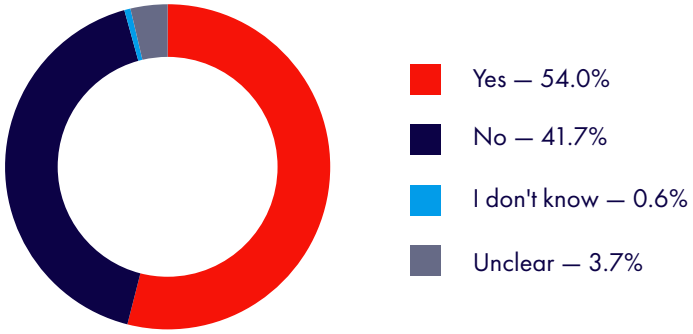
FAILURE TO INTERVENE: DELIBERATELY OVERLOOKING VIOLENCE

> **They never come when you call them.**
>
> Nathalie, Belgium

> **I never contacted the police because I know they won't come. We're used to that, we know we're on our own.**
>
> Laura, France

While this research has revealed that police officers themselves commit acts of violence against sex workers, our analysis also documents the widespread tendency of police to deliberately overlook violence perpetrated by others. Overall, more than half of our participants (54%) reported instances where police refused to intervene or deliberately ignored violence that they had experienced (n=163).

FIGURE 17: POLICE FAILURE TO INTERVENE IN SEX WORKERS' VICTIMISATION



These figures varied across different legal settings and demographic markers. There were some differences based on legislative models: 63% of participants in partially criminalised settings had been failed by the police, compared to 57.1% in Swedish model contexts, 48.7% in criminalised contexts, and 49.1% in regulated contexts. This suggests that both regulation and criminalisation fail to effectively address violence against sex workers or improve their access to justice and police protection.

While 46.3% of migrants reported incidents where the police failed to intervene to protect them, this neglect was experienced by 56.7% of non-migrants. 49.5% of cis women reported that the police had deliberately ignored violence perpetrated against them, compared to 67.6% of trans women, 66.7% of cis men, and 50% of trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants.

52.8% of participants working in the open scene were left unsupported by police during violent incidents, compared to 53.6% of those working in the closed scene. 57.1% of participants working both in open and closed scenes experienced being deprived of police assistance. While the figure for those working independently stood at 50.9%, it was higher for those with experience of working for third parties, at 63.6%.

→ **SEE TABLE 14 IN THE APPENDIX.**

The data revealed two forms of police inaction: active (refusing to intervene) and passive (failing to intervene). Both of these represent deliberate decisions made by police officers that further harm sex workers and deny them their rights as victims of crime. Passive inaction experienced by participants included police taking too long to arrive at crime scenes, 'closing ranks', or failing to provide protection against known dangerous individuals. Examples of active refusal to intervene in crimes police knew were occuring included observing participants being harassed or assaulted but not approaching the scene; abandoning victims at crime scenes; refusing to help despite clear evidence that crimes had been committed; dismissing or not believing participants; failing to file proper victims' reports; actively siding with perpetrators; or punishing sex workers after they were assaulted.

Many participants who had been victims of crimes recounted experiences of being neglected or abandoned by the police. Their calls for assistance either went unanswered and the police either never arrived at the scene or the officers took several hours to respond.

> **I wanted to report the abuse to the police, but they didn't listen to me and hung up, and I panicked.**
>
> Martina, North Macedonia

> **I called the police and said, "Look, I'm here. Please, I've just been robbed, I've been beaten." This and that. "Send us the address", said the police. I was searching, "I'm here, in that street." Well, they said they were coming, but they never did and I kept waiting like a fool until I walked away.**
>
> Lilith, Spain

> **It was about 6 a.m. and I was bleeding. I called the police but they didn't come. They didn't arrive, they never arrived. I went outside the bar and there was a traffic light, and a man was passing by and saw me. He said to me, "But girl, what happened to you?" And I, sitting on the stairs, dripping blood, said, "Please, can you call me an ambulance? Because I called the police but they didn't come." He made the call and the ambulance came to take me to the hospital. Just when it arrived, the police arrived as well. The same old thing, the same old thing. They saw me and said, "Holy shit! You again?" Fucking hell. I also confronted them, I got upset. So we don't have the right to report?**
>
> Ángela, Spain

> **I was with a client and we were supposed to go to a hotel, but he took me to some village instead. I asked to stop at a gas station. When we stopped, I asked the employee at the gas station for a phone, and he gave me one to call the police. I told the police, "I ran away from a client. Please, hurry up, he wants to torture me, rape me, by force, I mean. I'm hiding at a gas station. Can you come quickly?" They said they would come but I waited for half an hour and they didn't show up. The gas station employee then called again. He was also waiting for them. They told him, "We will come, we will come." But they didn't. When the employee realised that they weren't coming, he called me a taxi and helped me escape. The police eventually came after 4 or 5 hours. Only after the man helped me escape.**
>
> Albiona, North Macedonia

Monika was physically and verbally attacked *while* calling the police, and although they could hear her being assaulted, they did not come to assist her.

> **It has happened to me several times. When I first called, I introduced myself. They told me something like, "Come to the station." At that moment I was attacked again, and they literally heard me being threatened and things like that, and that I was crying. I was being hit. I mean, they could imagine very well what was going on but didn't come to the scene anyway.**
>
> Monika, North Macedonia

Being abandoned by the police after calling for help or requesting intervention was a common experience for racialised sex workers, largely due to institutionalised racism and xenophobia within police forces.

> **I'm not a Swiss person. This is not my country, and I'm afraid of police here because I saw the way they behave. So I don't run to them when I have problems. When something is happening, they try to ignore us because we are Black. The girls try to stop the police but when they stop and see that we are Black, they drive off.**
>
> Joy, Switzerland

We also documented instances where police officers directly witnessed participants being harassed or assaulted but still failed to intervene. Police officers failing to respond to violence they observe gives perpetrators a sense of impunity and legitimises abuses against sex workers.

> **Usually, when it happens on the street that guys are pushy or make sexist remarks, the police who witness it do not react. They are minimising what happens.**
>
> Iggy, Belgium

> **The policeman didn't help me defend myself when I was attacked by the client. He didn't intervene either when the client took my phone afterwards, right in front of him. I asked the policeman to make the client give me back my phone but he told me to calm down. He didn't help me, neither because of the aggression, nor when my phone was taken.**
>
> Ana, France

> **Once when I was standing on the street, a drunk customer approached me and started pushing me. The police, recognising him – he is always there – and not wanting to get into trouble, didn't approach me. And so I remained in a very bad situation.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

> **There were occasions where customers assaulted me, and the police came or were passing by but didn't intervene. Instead, they told me to go home because if I stayed there, I would get a fine.**
>
> Chumina, Spain

While Chumina was failed by the police who witnessed her assault and threatened her with a fine, at least 3 other participants were beaten by the police immediately after being subjected to violence. Cesibel was brutally attacked on the street, and when the police arrived, instead

of helping, the officers beat her. After the assault, they abandoned her at the scene and did not even call an ambulance.

> **I told them that I had been assaulted, but the police went straight to me and beat me up, after I had already been beaten up by the others. I told them I had a knife cut, and they said to go and get treated. But they didn't call an ambulance or anybody else. The fact is that they have an obligation to call an ambulance because there was blood. There had been blood, quite a lot of blood actually. But they didn't and just left me lying there like a dog.**
>
> Cesibel, Spain

Police failure to intervene in the violence and crimes experienced by sex workers also included refusing to pursue complaints made by sex workers and denying them assistance despite clear evidence of a crime. Numerous participants told us that they have been dismissed when trying to report crimes. The failure to act, for example, "when crimes are not investigated or evidence has not been properly secured" (CSD, 2013: 17; Punch, 2009), constitutes a form of police corruption. Such inaction by the police also contributes directly to the victimisation of sex workers.

> **When I went to report a case, they didn't take me seriously and didn't want to intervene.**
>
> Ana, North Macedonia

> **Every time that we go and ask for help, the police never provide it. I try to help other women, but the police do not help. My friend was attacked while working on the street. The police said that she had to be threatened 3 times before they could take action. Even after she was attacked and we had the name, Facebook account with photos, and the licence plate number of one of the perpetrators, they still insisted they could not do anything.**
>
> Maria, UK

MISTREATMENT UPON REPORTING CRIMES

> **The police don't take us seriously. When we report violence and ask for protection, whether it's because of domestic violence, violence from clients, or from whoever, they don't take us seriously. We don't get the proper protection, and for those reasons we refuse to report at all.**
>
> Rashida, North Macedonia

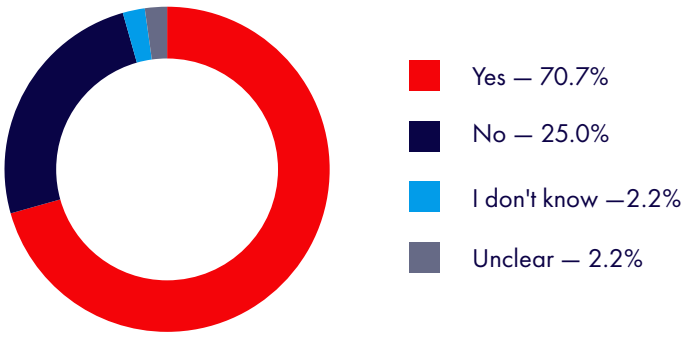
Our research shows that fear of maltreatment and punishment by the police are key factors preventing sex workers from reporting violence and crimes, regardless of the legal context in which they operate. Sex workers do not expect fair treatment from police officers and are concerned about negative consequences when seeking help. Our data indicates that mistreatment when reporting crimes and seeking justice was very common across all the countries under study. This is significant, as it highlights that sex workers' re-victimisation at the hands of police officers is a key reason why they choose not to report incidents in the first place.

DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT AS A VICTIM OF CRIME

> **All the times that you go to the police station they treat you like shit.**
>
> Catalina, Spain

70.7% of participants who had contact with police as victims of crime reported experiencing discriminatory treatment (n=92). This means that discrimination was a very common experience for sex workers reporting crimes, as they were treated with contempt and disdain at times when they had a right to care and protection and were in particular need of them.

FIGURE 18: POLICE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SEX WORKERS REPORTING VIOLENCE



The discriminatory treatment sex workers faced when reporting violence reflected the multidimensional nature of stigmatisation and prejudice institutionalised within police forces. 65 participants across all countries under study reported having been denied the rights, trust, and respect that other citizens can take for granted. Of these, 41 told us that they were not taken seriously when reporting crimes against them. This included being laughed at, belittled, mocked, or gaslighted (reported by 38 participants), and being dismissed or treated as a nuisance (27). Simply being sex workers was enough for police officers to dismiss participants' reports or calls for protection.

> **Sex work is frowned upon by the police, and they don't take us seriously.**
>
> Selina, France

> **I was attacked in a restaurant. I went to report it to the police, and they just laughed at me. They did not take any measures to hear me out or anything. They just laughed.**
>
> Tina, North Macedonia

> **I had a break-in to my apartment. It was someone who had pretended to be a client and got into my flat. And when the police got there, it didn't feel like they took me seriously. [...] It was really like, "You're a whore, it doesn't matter."**
>
> Yasmin, Sweden

Homophobia and transphobia institutionalised within police forces also affected sex workers seeking help. Eighteen trans sex workers were exposed to discriminatory treatment by police when trying to report violence or harassment they experienced. Participants noted that they were not taken seriously, their cases were not prioritised or given proper attention, and, in some instances, their reports were effectively 'archived' without any action being taken. In other cases, police officers refused to process complaints or reports made by trans sex workers.

> **When you want to report something, they see you as if you were some kind of toy. They gather to look at you and ridicule you as if you were some freak. They might just write something down and do nothing. They don't take any action.**
>
> Lila, North Macedonia

> **Sometimes we were pushed and insulted by the police officers. They do not take us or what we said seriously. They do not process our cases because we are transgender. Our cases are closed very soon and sent to the archive.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

Eighteen migrant sex workers also reported experiencing discriminatory treatment when seeking help after being assaulted. Maria told us about police officers who treated her as if she were invisible when she sought their assistance.

> **My sister was here with me, and we needed help because there was a man who was getting very violent, verbally, and we thought that things would turn physical and he was going to beat us up. So we went to the police, to the local police, which is very close, and they didn't pay any attention to us because we don't speak German. [...] They didn't care about our case anyway. The only thing they cared about was what we were doing, how long we were here, and what our work was. They didn't care that there was a man who was threatening us with death. [...] The police at that time did nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing at all. We were two invisible people right in front of their eyes.**
>
> Maria, Switzerland

VICTIM BLAMING

As previously noted, one of the most harmful and degrading manifestations of sex work stigma is the responsibilisation of sex workers for the violence and abuse they endure. Our data shows that victim blaming when reporting crimes is very common. Numerous participants shared instances in which they were directly held responsible for harassment from clients and the general public, or were treated as though they deserved the violence they experienced. The following interview excerpts demonstrate the scope and prevalence of victim blaming faced by sex workers when reporting violence or seeking help.

> **I went to my neighbourhood police station, knocked on the door of the duty officer, and I told him that there's a man threatening me. He was listening to me very carefully, until he asked me how this man knew me and what my profession was, and I replied that I was a sex worker. He frowned, his attitude changed completely, and he started treating me as an offender, saying that maybe it was my fault too because that's my job, that it wasn't a proper job, and that I was a healthy young man and should do some other job. [...] They sent me back home and told me to stop doing sex work because it's something that will always give me trouble and something that's very dangerous.**
>
> Alex, Greece

> **A client came to me and let his mates into my flat. I was very scared by this incident. I was so afraid, I couldn't sleep at home for 8 or 9 months. After they were at my house, I called the police. About 45 minutes or an hour later, the police were at my house. I felt very neglected. They said things like, "This is what happens if you take customers home. This is what happens when you work like this." That was how they treated me.**
>
> Yasmin, Sweden

> **When I called they didn't want to come, so I went there, since I had the first and last name of the client, it was on my PayPal. When I went to press charges, they didn't want to investigate further. They told me – because I didn't hide my work from them – that I was perfectly aware of the risks that come with this job, and that it was my own fault that it happened. And that I had to take responsibility for what happened.**
>
> Selina, France

As indicated in those quotes, victimised sex workers are consistently denied control over their own experiences; they are seen as victims of an inherently violent industry. Yet, when sex workers do decide to report crimes against them, when they do seek justice as victims of a crime, they are victim-blamed and accused of having 'asked for it'. Their experiences as victims are undermined and challenged.

Also commonplace was being blamed and dismissed by the police when participants reported sexualised violence. Many noted that police dismissed or downplayed their reports, treating them as if they deserved or provoked these instances of sexualised violence because they provided sexual services.

> **I think it's not even some particular behaviour, it's this casual and dismissive attitude in relation to sexual assault. When women want to file a complaint for rape, they are not taken seriously and it's being a bit minimised. The attitude of the police is like, "It's okay, it happens, it doesn't matter." Or maybe it's actually more than an attitude.**
>
> Amandine, Belgium

> **Being a woman and being expected to engage in certain sexual practices, for example, is considered risky. And it is assumed, therefore, that it's deserved, and so I shouldn't press charges. Or in any case, I should have known that being assaulted is bound to happen.**
>
> Iggy, Belgium

Furthermore, police officers often refused to classify the sexualised violence reported by participants as rape or sexualised violence, reflecting the harmful and dehumanising assumption that 'sex workers cannot be raped' or sexually violated (Cambell & Sanders, 2021; Pauw & Brener, 2003; Stardust *et al.*, 2021).

> **You can sense the attitude they have since they already know about me. If I were to be raped, they would say, "People like you can't be raped."**
>
> Elin, Sweden

> **When I made the complaint, they didn't reject it, but you could tell that they were really annoyed to process it. There was no empathy, no understanding, and they were really annoyed and had this attitude like, "She was asking for it." It's as if I disgusted them a little. I don't know how to explain it. They were super distant, they were like, "You're an escort, so that's how it is."**
>
> Essia, France

> **They sent me away and belittled me, telling me that this is my job. It is not my job to get raped.**
>
> Stella, Greece

The assumed responsibility for sexualised violence was also evident in the case of Ava, who became pregnant as a result of a rape. When she reported her assault, however, the police officers were more concerned with the paternity of the foetus than with the fact that she had been raped.

> **When I went to the police to report that I got raped, they looked me up and down. I had a suit on and a nice watch. I was well put together. When I started telling my story, I could sense that they were judging me, as if they said, "Yeah, you deserve it. Go and find yourself another job." I could feel it in their questions, in the way they were looking at me. [...] I remember saying to myself, why did I come wearing this watch, because they were so fixated on it. They looked at it all through the interview. I could tell, even when I cried, that the female police officer couldn't care less. It was almost like I was saying, "Stop it, please. [...] I got pregnant. [...] Obviously it is from the assault." But she was like, "Are you sure it's this guy? Well, you are meeting a lot of men." I said to her, "Firstly, I know my body. And you know, it falls exactly on that day, in terms of how many weeks I'm pregnant." [...] So, it was very judgmental. The energy in the room was very bad and they weren't compassionate at all, basically, like I deserved it. [...] I think they didn't deal with it properly, and they didn't quite understand the definition of sexual assault. They were more interested in who the baby's father was. And they were almost suggesting that there were so many guys that I had sex with, that they couldn't really know. But that wasn't the issue. The issue was that I had been sexually assaulted. [...] And I felt that they were under the impression that it's normal for me not to use condoms with clients, and no, it's not.**
>
> Ava, UK

The police officers' preoccupation with Ava's appearance, and the fact that she is a sex worker, led them to treat her as 'unrapeable'. They assumed she lacked the ability to understand herself, her body, or the harm done to her. Their focus on her watch and appearance demonstrates a pervasive stereotype of sex workers as making 'easy money', which caused them to view her with suspicion and disdain. They doubted her claim of rape, driven by a combination of misogyny and whorephobia that blames women and sex workers for being assaulted. Even as Ava cried and detailed her traumatic experience, seeking justice, she was denied compassion and support.

VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT UPON REPORTING VIOLENCE

Besides dismissive, stigmatising, and discriminatory treatment, participants also experienced violence and harassment by the police when reporting crimes. Stigma-driven emotional abuse and harassment were particularly common. Several participants also reported instances of sexual harassment by the police. For example, seven participants were subjected to sexist and sexualised comments by the police, including attempts to solicit services, while reporting violence or seeking help.

> **The attacker started beating on the door, attempting to break it down, so she dialled 112. The police then arrived. I'm not sure what this procedure is supposed to look like, but one of the cops asked for her phone number. Because he claimed that she is nice, perhaps he will come as a client. He also inquired about the costs. He grabbed her number and told her that it was a little much for his income, but he'd get back to her.**
>
> Rena, Poland

> **I reported a crime at the police station and the officers were all like, "Hey doll, how much for an hour with you?" So you walk in, injured, to report that someone tried to kill you, beat you up, rob you, and they are like: "Hehe, how much for an hour?"**
>
> Kamila, Poland

In some other instances, sex workers who experienced violence or assaults were not only mistreated, disciplined, or abandoned by the police for 'bringing violence on themselves', but were also further punished with police violence.

> **We don't go to the police because we end up being beaten. And it's deemed our fault because we are considered provocative since we are trans.**
>
> Rafaela, Greece

Similar to four other participants, Monica told us about being beaten at the police station, when she went with colleagues to report a crime.

> **We went to the station to report a physical assault. At first, the police officer told us to wait for our turn. An hour or two passed, and all the time we saw people who had come after us being taken care of. At one point, when I went to the registration desk again, to point out that we were still waiting, he started yelling at us that he didn't have time to argue. At that moment, I also started to address him a little louder and he said to me, "Do you need drugs? Why are you so nervous? You get your turn when I say so." And during that exchange, he suddenly came out from behind the registration desk, bent my arm, hit me in the back with his elbow, and pushed me away, telling us to leave and that we had no business being there. My friend and I didn't leave but stayed. We had to wait for a few more hours until the officer in charge took her report.**
>
> Monica, North Macedonia

CONDITIONALISED SUPPORT

Another issue documented by our research was the conditional nature of the support provided to sex workers seeking help from the police. Several participants reported that officers withheld assistance unless they cooperated with them. For instance, Lilit was told by police officers in Armenia that they would not help her with her case unless she provided identifying information about her and her colleagues' clients. Other sex workers were interrogated and pressured to denounce their (presumed) bosses, third parties, or traffickers when reporting violence, and were disregarded or dismissed when they refused to comply. Jessica was similarly denied help when she went to report a violent assault. Officers refused to help her because they assumed she had information on certain suspects. Despite her extensive injuries, she was denied her rights to "receive proper protection, support, and access to justice" (EC, n.d.b), dismissed, and treated as untrustworthy and deceitful.

> **"There was one time, when I was violently attacked. The man really injured me badly, and I went to the police. I usually wouldn't go to the police, but I was so badly injured, with massive bruises. I said I wanted to see him prosecuted, and some higher up policeman interviewed me, even when I was still injured and hurting. He said to me that I had to tell him everything I know about what's going on in the area, because I was living in [redacted], and they wanted information about other people. And I said, "No, I don't know anything about anything", which was the truth. And I showed him my injuries. But he said, "I don't care about that. When you decide to tell us what you know, then we'll do something about it."**
>
> Jessica, UK

FROM VICTIM TO OFFENDER

> **"We are constantly in conflicts and have problems with the police. When we are beaten or abused in the street, we are the ones who are being wronged, but it turns out that the police consider us guiltier than the people who abuse us.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

The criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work often result in sex workers being treated as perpetrators or offenders when they report violence and seek help. Twenty-one participants faced, or were threatened with, administrative or criminal charges and other forms of punishment after reporting a crime. Fourteen discussed being framed for crimes by clients, members of the general public, or police officers after calling the police for help.

Participants also experienced not being believed and being immediately assumed to be the guilty party when reporting violence. Police officers often sided with abusive clients and other

perpetrators, believing their accounts over those of sex workers. As a result, while violent clients and other perpetrators were supported by the police, sex workers were punished for the violence and abuse they had suffered. Aga and Ana were detained following assaults they had experienced.

> **When we work in the street we face many cases of violence. There was a time when a group of hooligans was not taken to the police station, because the police thought that we were the ones who had instigated the quarrel, so they arrested and took us to the station. There were also other incidents where officers did not believe us and kept us for hours at the police station.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

> **There was an argument between me and a client who wanted his money back. I ran out of the hotel to escape. He ran after me and threw me against a car. There was a plainclothes officer, and when he pulled out his police ID, I thought he'd help me, you know, that he would defend me and everything. But in the end he did nothing for me. He called a lot of his colleagues, who took us both to the station, and I was the one who went into custody afterwards. [...] I think it could be seen as blackmail because there was money at stake that I didn't want to return to the client. The policeman said to me, "You're going to go into custody if you don't return the money. It would be easier if you returned it. That way everyone is happy." But it was my money that I had earned. So they took me into custody.**
>
> Ana, France

Participants were also punished and not believed due to the racist stereotype that Black people and other people of colour are criminals (termed the 'racialisation of crime' or 'Afrophobia', see Mancini *et al.*, 2012; Namoradze & Pacho, 2018; Nwabuzo, 2015)

> **My friend took a client. They were fighting in the room. I heard somebody screaming and shouting. I went to check, but the door was closed. We called our boss, but he didn't answer. As a migrant I can't call the police. In Spain I can but not here. I would have problems. Everything we say, they don't believe us. [...] We opened the door. There was a big man, and he was beating our friend. We had to separate them and ask the client to leave. After 10 minutes, the police came. The client had called the police and told them that the girls had beaten him. The police took me to prison, and I stayed there 24 hours. Everything I said they didn't believe. The client was white, I'm Black. They believed him. They didn't bring him in, which is not right. I didn't beat him. We just had to hold him. We are still waiting for the results of the inquiry.**
>
> Ana, Switzerland

Criminalisation and repressive sex work policies also contributed to the penalisation of sex workers when reporting violence. Participants told us about being punished for the illegal or unauthorised provision of sexual services, soliciting, or other offences when reporting crimes and seeking help from police. Several participants who sought police protection were threatened with criminal charges for brothel keeping when working with colleagues for safety. This was the case for Maria and Marina in the UK, where any third-party involvement in sex work is criminalised.

> **I was in this house, and I was working in this flat, and then we called the police after a robbery. But the police didn't really help us. They were more concerned with what we were doing in the house than what had actually happened to us. I would say I was really naive, and I called the police with good intentions, thinking that they could help us somehow. And the police came to the house and they could see what happened with this gang, but instead of asking about these guys, they were asking many, many questions about our work. [...] Three days or a week later we received this letter, saying that if we were in the house again, the police were going to come back to check. And if we were in an illegal situation, we were going to be deported and maybe prosecuted.**
>
> Maria, UK

> **It was obvious what had happened, but the police started to interrogate me. They didn't even care that I had been attacked, they just wanted to know what was happening here. "Are you a prostitute? Where are you from? Who are you working for?" All these sorts of things. They didn't even offer me medical help or let me sit down or have some water. [...] They weren't even asking the guy anything, and when he had calmed down, he said that I attacked him! And they believed him! I was shocked when they started to question me about this and were saying something about false imprisonment and other things I didn't understand. [...] They let the client go and searched the house. And they were saying that they had to take the money and the laptops and so on, because it wasn't legal what we were doing, that it was a brothel and that we had to leave the flat or they would come back and arrest us. Back then, my English was not as good, and I didn't know anything about these laws, so the whole experience was very frightening, as I didn't want to be deported and didn't know what else the police might do. Many of us are traumatised from things the police have done to us, so you're feeling terrorised. But I know that is the intention. They were taking advantage of that, because they knew I would be scared, so they could be on their power trip, steal my money, and humiliate me, and all these things. So the treatment was very bad. As a victim of an attack I was treated as a criminal when, actually, they are the ones who are criminals.**
>
> Marina, UK

In addition to the risk of being falsely accused and criminalised for brothel keeping, both Maria and Marina expressed fear that calling the police for help might lead to their deportation from the UK. Indeed, the police often used an ambiguous migration status to prosecute migrant sex workers reporting violence. Some migrant participants were deported after seeking help from the police.

> **I needed help. The police said, "We'll help you, we'll send you back to your country." I replied, "But I have a daughter." And they said, "With your daughter too". [...] But when I went to file a complaint, they took advantage of it. They took my passport and deported me.**
>
> Luciana, Spain

> **If you don't have any papers and dare to call the police, you become a criminal, because what they do is they arrest you, even when you called them because you had a problem. [...] These kids came by, shooting pellets and hitting me in the leg. The police took me to the hospital. There, they gave me a tetanus shot and cured me, but they told me that they couldn't take the pellet out. The next morning, I came here to the association and then went with the doctor to file a complaint. At the police station. I was walking around with a limp, and my leg was black from the knee to the thigh from the haematoma that had been caused by the pellet wound. We waited for a long time, and then they sent me to an office which turned out to be the immigration police. There, they said to me, "You know what? As you don't have any documents, we're going to open an expulsion file for you." The doctor said, "But she's coming to file a complaint because she's been hurt." To which the immigration officer replied, "But the problem is that you don't have documents." I had just come to Spain.**
>
> Vanessa, Spain

ACCESS TO VICTIMS' RIGHTS

> **I was beaten and went to the police station. They said that I couldn't file a report because they knew me, and I was told to go away. So I called the lawyer and then we went to report the case together and that was it.**
>
> Jagoda, North Macedonia

Policymakers in Europe and beyond are committed to ensuring that victims of crime and violence receive the necessary support and protection. The 2012 EU Victims' Rights Directive (EU, 2012c) establishes minimum standards for the rights, support, and protection of victims of crime. The directive aims to ensure that individuals who have fallen victim to crime are properly protected, supported, granted access to justice, and treated with respect and recognition. According to the

2020 report on the implementation of the Victims' Rights Directive, "victims shall be recognised and treated in a respectful, sensitive, tailored, professional and non-discriminatory manner by all actors coming into contact with them" (EC, 2020).

In addition to the provisions of the Victims' Rights Directive, as this research report was being prepared, the EU ratified the new EU Directive on Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (EU, 2024). This new directive requires EU Member States to ensure the provision of specific support to victims who experience intersectional discrimination or are at increased risk of suffering violence against women. The recital to the directive further specifies that this may include 'women in prostitution', who should therefore receive specific protection and support (EU, 2024).

Similarly, the preamble of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (CoE, 2011), also known as the Istanbul Convention, recognises the structural nature of violence against women. It acknowledges that such violence is both a cause and consequence of unequal power relations between women and men, limiting the full realisation of women's rights (CoE, 2011). The Istanbul Convention identifies discrimination, harmful practices, and gender stereotypes as root causes of violent behaviour. It obligates states to ensure that both protective and supportive measures, as well as investigations and judicial proceedings, are based on a gender-sensitive understanding of violence.

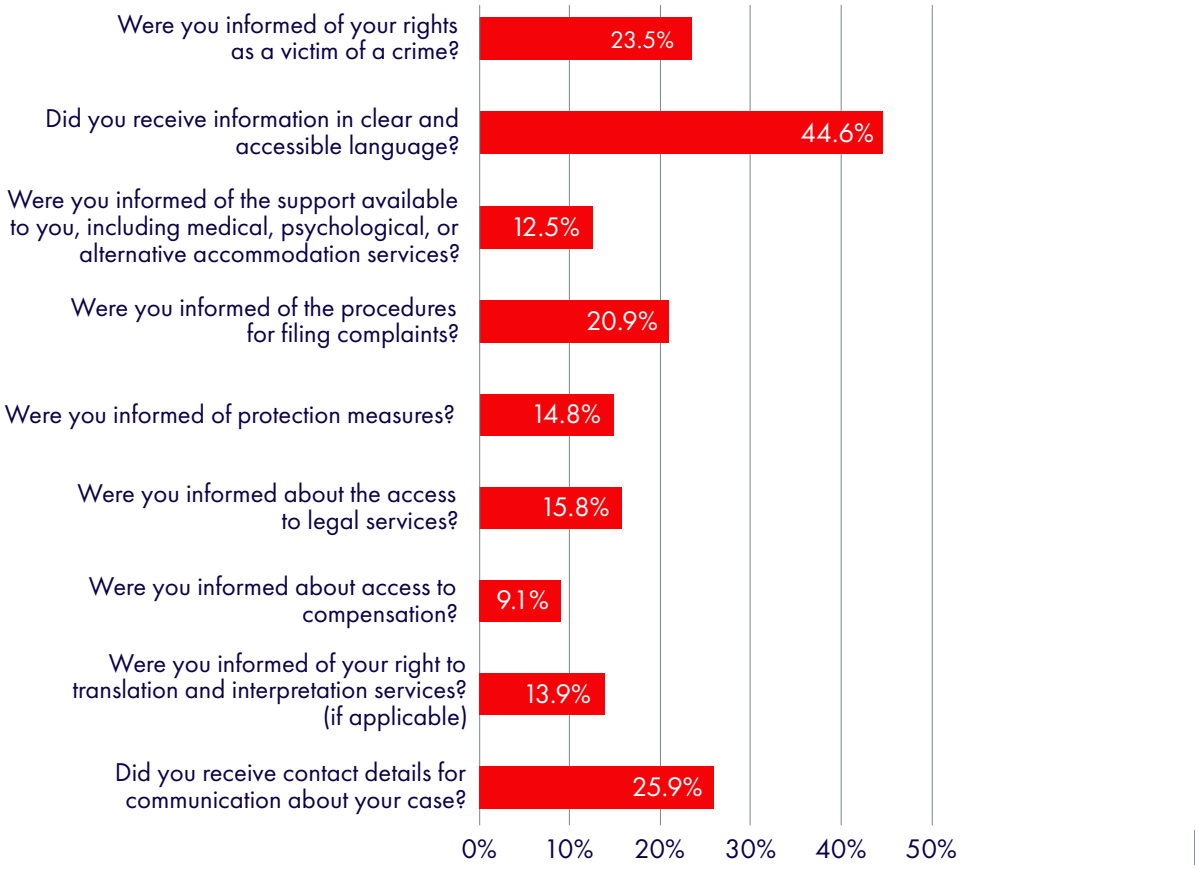
Furthermore, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), which monitors states' compliance with the Convention, has highlighted the special status of sex workers as victims. At its 19th meeting, GREVIO (2021: 10) agreed that prostitution should be considered a significant risk factor for exposure to violence against women. In its evaluation procedures, GREVIO emphasised the need to systematically address the specific risks of multiple and intersectional discrimination faced by women in prostitution, as well as their challenges in accessing general and specialised support services, including shelters.

Despite the recognition by both the European Union and the Council of Europe that sex workers who face intersectional discrimination are at heightened risk of violence, and that their victimisation falls under the definition of violence against women, this research found that sex workers are consistently denied their rights as victims of crime.[18]

The following table illustrates the extent of the violations of sex workers' rights as victims of crime.

18 The EU Victims' Rights Directive is a binding instrument for the protection of victims' rights in the EU, and does not apply to some of the countries covered by this research, such as Armenia and Switzerland. The UK left the EU several years after the EU Victims' Rights Directive came into force, and it can be assumed that UK legislation, for the time being, is still in line with the directive, and that Northern Macedonia, as an EU candidate country, should strive to achieve EU standards. The Council of Europe Convention has been ratified by all the countries under study, with the exception of Armenia.

FIGURE 19: SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS AS VICTIMS OF CRIME


Were you informed of your rights as a victim of a crime?
23.5%
Did you receive information in clear and accessible language?
44.6%
Were you informed of the support available to you, including medical, psychological, or alternative accommodation services?
12.5%
Were you informed of the procedures for filing complaints?
20.9%
Were you informed of protection measures?
14.8%
Were you informed about the access to legal services?
15.8%
Were you informed about access to compensation?
9.1%
Were you informed of your right to translation and interpretation services? (if applicable)
13.9%
Did you receive contact details for communication about your case?
25.9%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%

INFORMED OF VICTIMS' RIGHTS

According to the EU Victims' Rights Directive (VRD), one of the key preconditions for victims' access to justice and inclusion in proceedings is ensuring that victims are aware of their rights and understand the information provided to them. Articles 3 to 7 of the VRD establishes the rights to which victims are entitled in terms of access to information.

THE VICTIMS' RIGHTS DIRECTIVE, CHAPTER 2, PROVISION OF INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Article 3: The right to understand and to be understood

Article 4: The right to receive information [about victims' rights] from the first contact with a competent authority

Article 5: The right to receive a written acknowledgement of their formal complaint and to make the complaint in a language that they understand

Article 6: The right to receive information about their case during the criminal proceedings

Article 7: The right to interpretation and translation

67.6% out of 102 participants asked were not informed of their rights as victims. Only 24 participants in our sample (23.5%) were informed of their rights when reporting crime.

> **Whenever I appear at the police, they should first inform me of my rights so that I understand them. Without saying anything, they immediately gave me a paper and a pen and said, "Write it down!"**
>
> Monica, Armenia

44.6% of participants received information in clear and accessible language when they reported crime as victims (n=83).

INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION SERVICES

Interpretation and translation services must be provided free of charge to victims of crime who do not speak the language used in criminal proceedings (Article 7, VRD). In the 36 cases where this was applicable, only 13.9% of participants were informed of this right.

While living in France, Sandra's abusive partner began exploiting her by taking her earnings. After he kicked her out of her home, she went to the police to report the crime but was not provided with appropriate translation or interpretation services. Instead, her 13-year-old son was forced to translate for her.

> **There was supposed to be an interpreter in France, but no, no one did. My son was with me. He is older, and he knows the situation a bit. I didn't know all the words, but it was still not cool to have your son do that for you.**
>
> Sandra, Belgium

It is highly problematic to put a child in the position of having to translate the details of their mother's abuse because law enforcement officials fail to provide services to which victims are legally entitled.

SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS

In accordance with the VRD, victims of crime should receive support throughout the reporting process and after. Articles 8 and 9 concern the victims' rights to general and specialist support services. These services should be confidential, free of charge, and "act in the interests of the victims before, during and for an appropriate time after criminal proceedings" (EU, 2012c).

Of the 96 participants asked, 83.3% were not informed about available support measures, such as medical or psychological aid, or alternative accommodation. Only 12.5% were provided with such information. Two were given this information only occasionally.

Kamila told us that when she reported a crime committed against her, she was not offered psychological assistance and was actively discouraged from seeking medical help, despite her injuries.

> **They promised me that we could put in the protocol that I genuinely needed medical help, but they said that if they would drive me to the hospital, I would spend endless hours waiting in the queue, and that my injuries were insignificant. I was surprised at how much I was hurting and bruised, and also about the fact that they appeared to offer medical assistance, but in such a way that I wouldn't use it. At no point during the proceedings was I offered psychological assistance.**
>
> Kamila, Poland

Even when support was offered, questions remained about the professionalism and suitability of these services. Several sex workers felt that police officers were more concerned with rushing them out of the station than providing them with actual help.

In some contexts, sex workers were directly excluded from access to support services after being victimised. Mays, a trans woman living in Sweden, was violently raped by a group of 5 men. When she sought psychological support after attempting to report her attackers, she was refused help by a psychologist because she was a sex worker.

> **They helped before, when I came to Sweden, but when she found out that I am a sex worker she didn't help me again. No one accepts you, that's the problem. You can't take help from anyone. She refused me as soon as she found out that I am a sex worker.**
>
> Mays, Sweden

In its Baseline Evaluation Report on Sweden, GREVIO (2019: 14) expressed concern that the support provided by social services and the public health care sector to women victims of domestic and sexual violence who are in addiction or prostitution fails to adequately address their victimisation. The refusal to provide psychological support upon the report of a crime further confirms that sex workers are discriminated against as victims of crime.

MAKING COMPLAINTS

20.9% of participants (n=91) were informed about the procedures for making complaints (Articles 22, 24, and 25 of the VDR). However, providing such information alone is insufficient, if it is not followed by the provision of support throughout the process of making an official complaint. This, in turn, can take both a psychological and financial toll on victims of crime. When participants were asked if they had been informed about such procedures, 74.7% said no.

> **No, all that was told to me by the lawyer.**
>
> Linda, Spain

> **No, no, they don't want to see us, let alone inform us about our rights.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

PROTECTION MEASURES

The VRD obliges its signatories to ensure that victims have access to protection from intimidation, retaliation, further harm by the accused or suspect, and harm during criminal investigations and court proceedings (Articles 18–24 of the VRD). Only 14.8% of participants who interacted with police as victims (n=88) were informed about protection measures. Notably, this figure does not reflect the number of participants who actually received such protection.

> **No, I'm hearing about this for the first time now.**
>
> Eli, North Macedonia

> **No, and I would have liked that. That was the most important thing for me, because I felt really unsafe.**
>
> Prune, France

Instead of receiving protective measures, participants were given advice that blamed them for their assaults, suggesting that sex work was the reason they had been victimised.

> **I don't know if this can be considered a protective measure, but this officer also asked if I would continue to live and work like this. He said it was a dangerous job and he would think twice whether he wanted to work like that.**
>
> Joanna, Poland

When participants were informed about or offered protection measures, being accompanied by a witness – a lawyer, outreach worker, or some other person deemed 'respectable' by the police – was crucial to ensuring their rights were actually upheld.

> **I was only informed about the protective measures because I wasn't alone, when I reported the case at the police.**
>
> Zorica, North Macedonia

LEGAL SERVICES

15.8% of participants who had interactions with police as victims of crime (n=95) were informed, offered, or provided legal services (Article 13 of the VRD). However, 81.5% were neither provided with information on legal services nor the legal services themselves.

> **[Laughs] Under no circumstances did this happen. I didn't hear anything about either a lawyer or a psychologist.**
>
> Stella, Greece

> **Certainly not. By the cops? They don't give a shit about that, they don't inform you about anything. They don't even tell you that it would be a good idea for you to have a lawyer right now. That's it, not a care in the world, nothing.**
>
> Rose, France

Several participants mentioned that, although they were not informed about the availability of legal services or offered legal advice, they relied on community-led or other sex workers' rights organisations when reporting crimes.

> **No, they did not offer. I requested lawyer referral services myself. The ones that are provided by our organisation. When there's an incident, I call the organisation and say I need a lawyer. Then, I take a lawyer with me to the police station, if necessary.**
>
> Vova, Armenia

COMPENSATION

Less than 10% of participants (n=88) were informed about access to compensation for the harms they experienced (Article 16 of the VRD). 89.8% were not provided with information on such a possibility.

Even when some sex workers were informed about access to compensation and applied for it, they did not receive compensation in any form.

> **My friend applied, but she didn't get anything, no. They refused to give her any compensation. They said she didn't have enough evidence, which is ridiculous. Because we have the guys in jail. How do we not have enough evidence?**
>
> Camilla, UK

CONTACT DETAILS FOR COMMUNICATION ABOUT CASE

Victims of crime should be provided with the contact details of the relevant authorities handling their case. Only 25.9% of victims were provided with such contact details (n=81).

> **Whenever I needed information on the case, I just called the police station and gave them the file number, because I never ever got any information from the cop who accepted reports from me, or anybody else, on who to report to for any next steps.**
>
> Aspen, Poland

> **Once I even asked for the case materials to be sent to me, because I know that it is within my rights to be familiar with the criminal case. But until now, I have not received a response, they didn't even send it.**
>
> Aga, Armenia

Even when they were provided with contact details, it did not necessarily result in meaningful communication.

> **There's never any response. I don't know, nothing.**
>
> Lea, Belgium

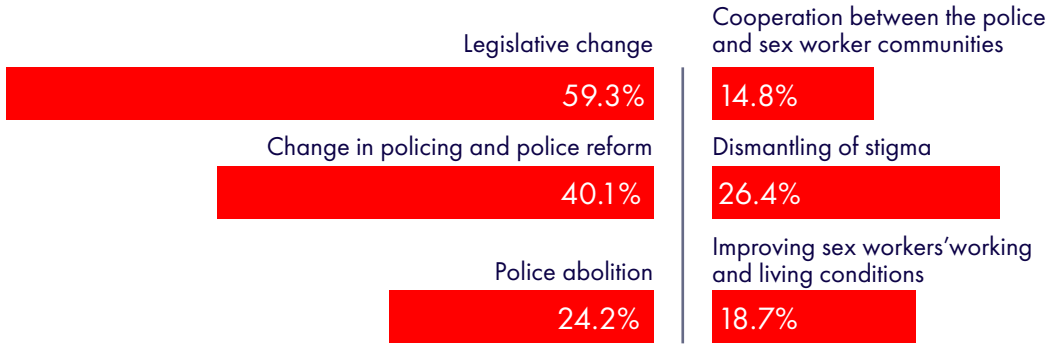
For some participants, this only occurred in the presence of a witness, as in the case of Jagoda from North Macedonia, who reported a crime while accompanied by a legal advisor.

WHAT DO SEX WORKERS WANT?

We asked participants what would make them safer at work and what could be done to improve relations between sex workers and the police. While these are two distinct questions, many sex workers saw them as overlapping, as their safety is inherently linked to their access to justice and protection. As we have demonstrated throughout this report, a combative and antagonistic relationship with the police directly affects sex workers' safety. For this reason, we chose to analyse their answers to both questions together. We present a variety of answers here to show that the safety of sex workers is directly influenced by law enforcement officials, with discussions of safety inevitably involving the behaviours and attitudes of police.

Participants' responses were diverse, with 6 overarching categories emerging. While some sex workers called for the abolition of the police or alternatives to policing, others demanded radical police reforms. Participants also expressed a desire for improved working and living conditions, the dismantling of institutionalised stigma, and legislative or structural changes. Many suggested several different interventions at once. Sex workers are not a homogeneous group; their perspectives, demands, and ideas differ, as this section illustrates. However, they are the key actors who must be listened to and meaningfully involved in shaping policies that affect their safety and access to justice.

FIGURE 20: SEX WORKERS' DEMANDS FOR CHANGE



LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

> **First of all, decriminalisation.**
>
> Orla, France

Like Orla, the vast majority of participants identified legislative change as the key step to improving their safety and their relationship with the police. The need for legal reform was emphasised by 108 sex workers (59.3%) across all legal settings (n=182). It was frequently mentioned as the most urgent and crucial change needed to improve sex workers' living and working conditions, as well as their access to justice.

When discussing the necessary legal shifts, participants stressed the need to repeal harmful and oppressive laws that impede sex workers' safety and expose them to harsh policing. Of the participants calling for legal change, 22.2% specifically mentioned the decriminalisation of sex work as essential for guaranteeing their human, civil, and labour rights, and for protecting sex worker communities from rights violations, exploitation, and violence – often at the hands of police officers. Decriminalisation was seen as a critical tool for improving sex workers' access to justice and ensuring their right to be protected by the police, instead of being punished or violated.

> **By decriminalising sex work, the safety of sex workers will rise to a much higher level, and the police themselves would then be legally obliged to protect us as sex workers.**
>
> Monika, North Macedonia

> **The most important thing is to decriminalise sex work. If anything happened to us, we would be able to report it to the police without any doubt. Now, if we report someone, they will come to arrest us!**
>
> Mary, UK

Even when not mentioning decriminalisation directly, the majority of participants, regardless of the legal context in which they worked, emphasised that the current legal status of sex work in their respective settings has a detrimental impact on their safety and access to justice. Participants discussed how various rules and regulations – which directly and indirectly penalise the provision of sexual services and soliciting, or criminalise their clients and workplaces, as well as their efforts to work together for safety – push them underground, isolate them, and make them more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. They also stressed that harmful and unfair legislation creates a significant power imbalance between sex workers and law enforcement, fostering conditions that fuel police abuse, mistreatment, and violence.

> **If the law was fair, no policeman could treat us like that.**
>
> Adda, Greece

> **I think if they changed the law, it would make things better because at the moment the police take advantage of the fact that they can arrest and abuse us. So if they changed the law, they could no longer arrest us for loitering and soliciting, or for working together, [which the law considers as] brothel keeping, or based on anti-social behaviour orders. I think it would give us more power against the police, and there would be less abuse.**
>
> Jessica, UK

Rather than being at the mercy of the police, participants wanted **the law to be on their side**, to quote Melina from Greece, and grant them rights, care, and protection from the state that they are often denied. Additionally, many participants stressed the need for legal changes to free them from police oppression and punishment, which manifest in excessive fines, detentions, and prosecutions that drive them into poverty and precarious socio-economic conditions.

Of the participants calling for legislative change, 20% stressed the need for recognition of sex work as work to increase sex workers' safety and improve their relations with the police. They highlighted that such recognition would grant them labour rights and protections that most currently lack, safeguarding them from precarious working conditions and workplace exploitation. The failure to recognise sex work as work pushes sex workers into informal economies, criminalises them, or exposes them to harsh policing, often under the guise of 'protection'.

> **If sex work is recognised as work, the police wouldn't go that far overboard with us. The madams wouldn't go that much overboard with us either.**
>
> Linda, Spain

> **I would like the law to change. We now have no fundamental rights, pension, insurance, healthcare, the basics. When we talk about security, if the legislative framework was changed, that would allow me to secure these things, it would help me.**
>
> Aris, Greece

> **The Swedish government has defined sex work as violence against women, so it's very hard for policemen to treat sex workers as actual workers to begin with, and hence show them the respect that you would show to a worker. [...] It would be a large change if sex work was defined as work. I think that would be the only way to really move forward. It must be the first step.**
>
> Tyra, Sweden

Eight participants called for policies that would protect sex workers from the abuse they experience at work. They stressed that violence and harassment related to their work often go unrecognised, unaddressed, or unpunished, which gives perpetrators a sense of impunity and increases their vulnerability to further abuse. What they wanted was the removal of harmful sex work regulations, the introduction of laws that prioritise their safety and protection, or the actual enforcement of existing laws (e.g. those related to sexual violence and assault) when sex workers are harmed.

> **I wish that we would be considered a little more, and that there were more protections for us, that's it. And that, when there's something wrong, they would really take it seriously, so that there are reprimands for those who have done wrong, and that it just stops.**
>
> Rachelle, France

> **I think that if there was a real judicial follow-up against clients, or aggressors in general, when there are attacks on sex workers, then that would already be a great deterrent to clients from committing assaults, because they would know that there are consequences to that. Then maybe all of these people would think twice about assaulting sex workers.**
>
> Iggy, Belgium

Calls for legal chance extended beyond demands for reforms specific to sex work policies. Several participants also stressed the need to repeal restrictive migration regulations that criminalise migrant sex workers, fuel police oppression and abuse, and expose them to state violence, punishment, and deportation.

> **To decriminalise the work and to stop the deportations, this would change things massively for us. I do not think it will change the police but it will stop some ways they can abuse us and threaten us. So it will remove one of our main problems, which is that we are targeted as criminals.**
>
> Marina, UK

CHANGE IN POLICING AND POLICE REFORM

According to 40.1% of participants, if sex workers are to be safe and relations between sex workers and police officers are to improve, policing strategies, the behaviour of police forces, and the institution of the police itself must all undergo radical transformation.

Of the participants calling for changes in policing, 45.2% viewed enhanced and targeted police training as a way forward. Our participants pointed out a general lack of police awareness of sex workers' realities and needs (as well as of laws related to sex work), prevalent prejudice within police forces, and a limited understanding of social, gender, ethnic, and sexual diversity. These were seen as key factors contributing to poor policing, which could be addressed through sensitivity training. Given the scope of victim blaming experienced by sex workers, participants also called for specialised police training on issues of consent and victim support.

> **I think police officers should undergo certain training at police departments when they start the job. And during those training sessions, they should get accurate information on why certain people work as sex workers. I think if they had that knowledge, they would see the main reasons for doing sex work and no longer discriminate against us.**
>
> Vova, Armenia

> **Instead of devoting public money from our taxes to police who patrol around strip clubs and try to mislead sex workers, I believe it should be allocated to some form of training on how victims should be handled and the law enforced.**
>
> Kamila, Poland

Many participants indicated that such sensitivity training, focusing both on sex workers' rights and human rights in general, should be made mandatory for all law enforcement. They also emphasised that the training would be most effective if it was conducted by sex workers and members of other affected communities.

Another important element of police reform, demanded by 37% of participants who called for police reform, was the need for appropriate police assistance to sex worker communities, including committed and supportive police interventions when they experienced harm. Such appropriate, non-discriminatory, non-judgemental, and care-oriented assistance should replace the harsh surveillance and intrusive policing often faced by sex workers. Oppressive, punishment-oriented police interventions deter sex workers from seeking police support.

> **Clearly, it would be better if they offered us support and protection, rather than having this controlling and dismissive attitude.**
>
> Amandine, Belgium

> **To me, when sex workers are in danger and call the police, the response should be to protect them. After hearing about their situation, the priority should be their safety, not asking for papers, putting them in handcuffs, and treating them like criminals.**
>
> Jessy, Switzerland

> **Sex workers should not be afraid to report any kind of violence and abuse to the police.**
>
> Madona, North Macedonia

Fifteen participants pointed to the punishment-oriented and discriminatory attitudes of most police officers and suggested developing a dedicated violence-response system for sex workers in specific locations. According to participants, this system could involve sex worker-led organisations and other trained professionals, such as lawyers and psychologists, who would support abused or victimised sex workers during interactions with the police. Trusted and supportive community members would act as mediators or a protective firewall, preventing re-victimisation, re-traumatisation, and further abuse by law enforcement. This demand echoes the experiences of many participants, who noted that they were only treated seriously and with some care during police interactions when accompanied by a representative of an organisation or a legal advisor. The idea of introducing a firewall between sex workers and the police was

also raised by migrant sex workers, who face threats of detention or deportation when reporting violence. Another option suggested by several participants was the introduction of a properly trained and sensitised police unit dedicated to supporting victimised sex workers.

> **There should be a regional referent, a sex work referent in the field of the police, a small structure, or even a single person who knows a little bit about sex workers' rights.**
>
> Essia, France

Several participants demanded greater accountability for violent and abusive behaviour towards sex workers by police. They noted that the violence and harassment they experience from individual police officers often goes unpunished, which legitimises and normalises the abuse they endure from law enforcement. Four participants talked about the need for stricter vetting and more selective recruitment of police officers to prevent violent and prejudiced individuals from joining the force.

While 5 participants called for reduced police surveillance, control, and presence in sex work spaces, 4 suggested that increased surveillance cameras, along with non-combative and supportive patrolling, could benefit sex workers, particularly those working in the open scene, by deterring violent individuals.

POLICE ABOLITION

In light of the increasing popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement, abolitionist feminism, and other anti-carceral movements, 24.2% of participants echoed their demands and called for the abolition of the police and the introduction of alternative systems to improve their safety. Pointing to the inherently violent character of policing, systemic abuses of power by police officers, and the role of policing in perpetuating violence against sex workers and other marginalised communities, they advocated for dismantling police forces. Unlike those calling for policing and police reforms, 43 participants expressed that they had no trust in the police as an institution and no hope for improving relations between sex workers and law enforcement. In their view, police do not increase sex workers' safety and do not provide protection when they are victimised. Instead, they described the police as a persistent source of threats, danger, and injustice that must be avoided at all costs and should be ultimately eradicated.

> **I think the police should be abolished. That is to say, instead of abolishing prostitution, I think we should abolish the police. This would be the best way to protect sex workers. You see, there are plenty of things to do for security, but in fact, it does not necessarily involve more cops – less cops, maybe. Because if the criminal laws around sex work didn't exist, we would be safer.**
>
> Thierry, France

> **This is an institution that should be avoided at all costs. Anyone who expects justice from the police is either foolish or ignorant.**
>
> Rosa, Poland

> **For me the police itself, as an institution, is a problem, because they are only in charge of repressing the most vulnerable people. They are not in charge of repressing the most powerful and oppressive people. So things between sex workers and the police are never going to work out. Never.**
>
> Linda, Spain

Calls for police abolition often involved demands to reduce the size and scope of policing and its influence on sex workers, as well as to redirect significant state funding allocated to police forces toward non-discriminatory, non-punitive support services for vulnerabilised communities. Several participants suggested that sex worker-led organisations and community initiatives are far better suited to provide help and protection to sex workers who have been harmed or are in need of support.

> **There are other measures in place, or perhaps other groups or communities, that can actually serve the situation better. And that would not, like, harm you or, just literally, risk your livelihood.**
>
> Ellis, UK

One participant suggested that rehabilitation for offenders would work as an alternative to the criminal justice system.

COOPERATION BETWEEN THE POLICE AND SEX WORKER COMMUNITIES

Twenty-seven participants (14.8%) felt that cooperation between sex workers, their organisations, and the police would be an effective way to improve sex workers' safety and reduce the harassment and violence they experience at the hands of the police. When discussing the potential for such cooperation, 15 participants mentioned the importance of an open dialogue between sex workers and police officers. This dialogue would allow sex workers to raise awareness and educate police forces about their needs, experiences, and work-related risks. Such discussions could lead to more informed responses and appropriate protection for sex workers in need, while shielding them from police mistreatment and violence. Fourteen participants directly called for regular cooperation between sex worker-led organisations and the police. This would involve training for police forces and mediation between the police and sex worker communities.

Fifteen of 182 participants asked (8.2%) reported having engaged with the police in collaboration on crime prevention strategies. In some instances, these collaborations with sex worker organisations had been successful. Katerina, for example, explained that the sex workers' union in Greece provides seminars to the new police officers. Participants noted that these collaborations were successful because the police appeared to be attentive to sex workers' needs, which felt like an 'evolution' in the relationship between workers and law enforcement.

> **The meeting was done here and joined by the chief of police. I think it went very well. He even made a report afterwards and all that, so it was taken seriously. And the fact that they came to the meeting and all, it means that they are interested in us. You have to acknowledge that. It's an evolution. It was an experience of sharing among both sides, and at the end, there was a report. I found that to be satisfying.**
>
> Doris, Belgium

However, in other countries, collaboration has proven unsuccessful. When Lila approached police officers about ways to prevent crime, the carceral logic of criminalising sex work unfortunately prevailed.

> **In the end, they stick to their side, we stick to ours, so we can't reach a mutual agreement. Their stand remains that sex workers should be punished and arrested.**
>
> Lila, North Macedonia

Several participants described how police officers used the guise of potential collaborations to abuse sex workers and coerce them into becoming informants.

> **They said they were retired police officers. And we used to go to meetings, they asked everyone to come, and they convinced us that we could all together stop trafficking and look after the girls. But it turned out they were just police anyway, trying to get information. They played us.**
>
> Connie, UK

Ultimately, the potential for successful collaboration between sex worker communities and the police is undermined by criminalisation and the inherently violent nature of the police as an institution.

> **You can improve as many strategies as you want, and create as many PowerPoints as you want. No problem. But the law is there, you see. The law which says that one must file a report when someone wants to press charges, it is already there. The law that says that you have to do such and such a procedure, in fact, all that already exists. On paper, rapists should be in jail and yet they aren't. And you can do as much prevention as you want, if at some point you don't have a change in people's mentalities, nothing will change. Change is much more complicated. To form a social movement is more complicated. [...] Because if you give fascists guns, you can tell them as many times as you want, don't shoot people of colour, it won't change anything. And you can have as many feminist associations as you want saying that sex workers are real people. If there is not, on a human level, this switch to acknowledge that maybe a woman does have the right not to be raped because she is not asking for it, then it will just be defeatist.**
>
> Marie, France

DISMANTLING OF STIGMA

26.4% of participants stated that reducing stigma would improve their relationship with the police and make them safer. Of those, 81.3% demanded that police officers recognise sex workers' humanity and dignity as a prerequisite for their safety and access to justice. They highlighted that widespread stigmatisation contributes to mistreatment, judgemental attitudes, and discrimination at the hands of the police, which discourages sex workers from seeking help and limits their access to the protection to which they are entitled. Participants called for basic empathy and humanity in the behaviour of police officers.

> **People should not be treated as objects but as persons. We want the police to talk to us very politely, because it doesn't matter whether we are sex workers, we are also human beings. We should be respected.**
>
> Monica, Armenia

> **They should treat us like people, after all it's their job. Like, sorry, but either you're professional or not. Just treat us like humans and not like outcasts. Don't look down on us. Just because we do that kind of work doesn't mean we are worse in any way.**
>
> Lola, Poland

> **I want them to stop seeing us as criminals and have these prejudices. They need to see that it's not just misery in our lives, and many people actively choose that line of work.**
>
> Elin, Sweden

> **The police need to learn to have a little bit more empathy with people. Even more so when it comes to us, because there are police officers who are very closed-minded and treat us like dirt.**
>
> Brenda, The Netherlands

> **We don't deserve to be mistreated. Have a little empathy, because no one knows what exactly happens in other people's lives, everyone has their own experience. Just as I try, in the midst of my pain and so many 'wonders' that I have had with the police, to have empathy and to understand the good and bad aspects of their work, they should try to understand our work, put themselves in our shoes, and treat us with understanding and respect. We are people, we are human, we have duties and rights, and we should not be judged.**
>
> Alicia, Spain

Ten participants discussed the need to reduce broader social stigma to ensure sex workers' safety and protection.

IMPROVING SEX WORKERS' WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS

18.7% of participants discussed the need to improve sex workers' working and living conditions as a means to enhance their safety and access to justice. The vast majority of those participants stressed the importance of giving sex workers more power and agency in determining their working arrangements and deciding on safety measures they can implement. They noted that, rather than making them safer, current sex work policies and policing strategies have a detrimental effect on sex workers' safety, depriving them of control over their work environments and exposing them to violence, exploitation, and abuse, including by the police. Participants demanded greater autonomy to improve their working conditions in ways that would benefit and empower them in relation to clients, employers, third parties, and police. They mentioned various strategies, including working together for safety; creating collective and cooperative workplaces managed by sex workers; and having someone present to ensure their safety, an option often hindered by the criminalisation of third parties and brothel-keeping laws. Participants also called for unrestricted access to safer sex supplies and other resources to protect their well-being. Those working in the open scene talked about the need for safe and protected workspaces, as the police currently push sex workers into remote and dangerous locations.

> **I want for us to have access to an area that is tolerant and safe, not one that's deserted and dangerous!**
>
> Dorothée, Belgium

> **The only way we could work in safety is if we were able to be together, in a self-managed place, obviously.**
>
> Shanelle, France

> **There are a lot of things I would like for my safety, for example, the possibility to work with someone who helps you with bookings or who is present during meetings. Or to work with several colleagues in the same place. That you could give your address to anyone without being afraid that it's a police officer. Being able to run a business as a sex worker would also increase your safety and provide financial security.**
>
> Sandra, Sweden

> **I would probably work with another woman, and install CCTV and things like that, which I don't do now because it's against the law, and I don't want anything like cameras to be used as evidence against me. I think I would do things very differently to what I do now, and it would be safer. Maybe I would hire security, maybe I would feel better about reporting things.**
>
> Serena, UK

Several participants also mentioned that their safety would improve with better options to screen clients – currently hindered by criminalisation – and the removal of legal restrictions on self-defence tools, such as pepper spray.

Three participants called for overall improvements in socioeconomic conditions, an enhanced welfare system, and increased state support for the most vulnerable communities, including undocumented migrant sex workers, single mothers, and others facing poverty and housing insecurity. They stressed how economic instability and precarity renders sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and work-related risks. Two other participants urged the state to provide alternatives for those who are most disadvantaged and engaging in sex work as a survival strategy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

> **Peer researcher: Now you're at the mercy of both the police officer and the customer and the passers-by.**
>
> **Maria: Exposed from all sides. A cliff in front of me and a river behind.**
>
> Maria, Greece

The evidence collected for this report clearly demonstrates that sex workers across Europe face significant barriers to accessing justice. The criminalisation of sex work, abusive law enforcement practises, and widespread stigmatisation and discrimination severely restrict sex workers' rights to legal protection. Whether targeted as offenders or victims of crime when seeking police protection, sex workers in Europe are systematically subjected to neglect, mistreatment, and harassment. Deprived of access to justice and care, they are especially vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and severe human rights violations, often perpetrated by law enforcement officials themselves. As our data reveals, instead of providing protection and facilitating justice, the police create dangerous environments for sex workers, further undermining their rights and safety.

The following section summarises the key findings of this research. We specifically focus on the harms and rights violations sex workers experience when interacting with the police, as well as the impact of policing and police mistreatment on sex workers' access to justice. We also explore the role of policing on sex workers' safety and their working and living conditions, and briefly discuss sex workers' perspectives on access to justice within their communities.

HARMS OF POLICING

Our findings reveal that sex workers across Europe face intense policing. Regardless of the legal frameworks in which they operate, sex workers are systematically surveilled, controlled, and profiled by the police. This occurs during routine patrols, identity checks, stop-and-frisk interventions, police raids, and crackdowns on sex work venues that target sex workers themselves, their workplaces, bosses and other third parties, co-workers, or clients. The criminalisation of sex work and other regulatory measures, including repressive migration laws, create a severe power imbalance between sex workers and law enforcement. These conditions also facilitate abusive law enforcement practises, leading to rights violations against sex workers.

REPRESSIVE POLICING

This research highlights the repressive nature of policing to which sex workers are subjected. Rather than improving sex workers' safety, protection, and access to rights, law enforcement strategies across Europe target them for surveillance and punishment. Evidence shows that

sex workers in Europe are systematically subjected to fines, arrests and detentions, and administrative or criminal charges for both their work and their efforts to protect themselves. On top of that, police confiscate their earnings and safer sex materials, threaten to or actually out and doxx them, and subject them to entrapment or extort money from them. Police frequently threaten sex workers with punishment, arrest, or deportation, and use harassment and intimidation to coerce compliance or force confessions. Our data documents numerous instances of police brutality, as well as arbitrary and unlawful enforcement of the law by police across Europe. These instances not only represent clear miscarriages of justice against sex workers but also reveal the pervasive nature of police corruption and systemic abuses of power condoned by law enforcement in Europe. Our findings also underscore the particular vulnerability of multiply criminalised and marginalised sex workers – such as migrants, trans and queer sex workers, sex workers working in the open scene, and sex workers who use drugs – to rights violations by police.

POLICE AS PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE

The immense scale and prevalence of violence experienced by sex workers at the hands of the police is one of the key findings of this research. Advocates of the Swedish model and other punitive approaches to sex work place their trust in police institutions, believing that the increased criminalisation of the sex industry will reduce the number of people selling or buying sex. This belief is based on the assumption that law enforcement will protect women who sell sex from violent clients and third parties. However, our data shows that, regardless of the legal model in place, law enforcement officials are among those who systematically perpetrate violence against sex workers. Sex workers across all settings under study are subjected to systematic physical, sexualised, and verbal abuse as well as threats from law enforcement officers.

Emotional abuse and harassment as well as threats, blackmail, and coercion are the most common forms of violence reported by sex workers across Europe, with the highest rates reported by participants in Swedish model contexts. Sex workers operating in criminalised and partially criminalised settings, trans women, and those working in the open scene are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexualised violence by the police. Regulatory models that do not directly penalise or criminalise the provision of sexual services – such as regulation, partial criminalisation, and the Swedish model – fail to protect sex workers from police violence. In fact, the prevalence and institutionalised character of police violence and harassment reflects harmful state policies that tolerate and normalise systemic and structural violence perpetrated against sex workers. Our findings are also in line with a long-documented history of marginalised groups experiencing high levels of police violence, particularly violence of a sexualised nature against women and sexual minorities (AI, 2016a; FRA, 2010; Girardi, 2022; Platt *et al.*, 2022).

STIGMATISATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Our findings document the widespread and multidimensional stigmatisation and discrimination experienced by sex worker communities at the hands of the police. Several forms of stigmatisation and discrimination were identified, including sex work stigma, transphobia and

homophobia, ableism, classism, misogyny, racism and xenophobia, HIV stigma, narcophobia, and stigma related to criminal activity or having a criminal record. Sex workers experience severe and overlapping forms of stigmatisation, rendering those with multiple intersecting identities particularly vulnerable to human rights violations (McGinley, 2019). Stigmatising and discriminatory treatment is not exceptional or rare but appears to be an ordinary, prevalent, and all-encompassing element of sex workers' policing and governance (Dziuban, 2024b: 368). This highlights the systemic and chronic nature of stigmatisation and discrimination, emphasising "the importance of understanding stigma as a structural regime that organises how sex work is positioned, regulated, and responded to" (Stardust *et al.*, 2021: 154; Krüsi *et al.*, 2016). Hence, our findings show that stigma is deeply embedded in the criminalisation of sex work and policing strategies that target sex worker communities across the European region. Whorephobia, transphobia, racism, narcophobia, and other overlapping stigmas drive the extensive policing of multiply marginalised communities and reinforce power imbalances between these communities and law enforcement agencies. Stigmatisation also perpetuates sex workers' disadvantaged position in relation to the police, rendering them more vulnerable to miscarriages of justice, harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

POLICE OFFICERS AS CLIENTS

Lastly, our findings reveal the prevalence of on- and off-duty police officers coming into sexual or sexualised contact with sex workers as clients. The use of undercover police officers posing as clients is employed across Europe as a policing tool to extract information and incriminate sex workers, as well as third parties, their colleagues, and clients. This policing strategy violates sex workers' rights and facilitates severe abuses of power by the police. Our research further documents that, beyond purchasing sex while on duty (ostensibly as part of law enforcement), police officers also use their position as law enforcement officials to exploit sex workers' legal vulnerability to coerce them into providing unprotected sex, accepting lower pay, or agreeing to services free of charge. These acts constitute severe human rights violations, shatter trust in law enforcement, and highlight the urgent need for systemic reform and accountability for the sexualised violence and abuse perpetrated by police officers.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Police forces across Europe systematically commit grave human rights violations against sex workers. In doing so, they breach a number of human rights instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights (CoE, 1950), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EU, 2012a), the International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966a), the International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966b), as well as the Convention against Torture (OHCHR, 1987), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN General Assembly, 1979), and the Istanbul Convention (CoE, 2011). The following table illustrates the documented human rights violations committed by the police against our research participants.

TABLE 5: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY POLICE

Police violence and repression	Violated rights
Over-policing and excessive punishment, including (arbitrary) fines, arrest, detention, eviction, prosecution, and deportation	• Right to free choice of work • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work • Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to liberty and security of person, including the right to protection from arbitrary arrest, detention and deprivation of liberty • Right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment • Right to freedom from unlawful and arbitrary interference with privacy and family life • Right to a fair trial
Confiscation of assets and extortion of money	• Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to freedom from unlawful interference • Right to property • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work
Confiscation of condoms and other safer sex materials	• Right to the highest attainable standards of health • Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to freedom from unlawful interference • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work
Outing and doxxing	• Right to privacy and family life • Right to freedom from unlawful interference with privacy and family life • Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to liberty and security of person • Right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work • Right to protection of (sensitive) personal data
Arbitrary use of force, police brutality, and abuses of power, including intimidation and forced confessions	• Right to life, liberty and security of person • Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment • Right to privacy • Right to live free from violence in both the public and private sphere
Emotional, physical, and sexualised violence by police, as well as threats, coercion, and blackmail	• Right to life • Right to dignity • Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to security of person • Right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment • Right to privacy • Right to the highest attainable standard of health • Right to freedom from slavery and forced labour • Right to live free from violence in both the public and private sphere • Right to freedom from unlawful interference with privacy and family life • Right to family

Discrimination	• Right to equality and non-discrimination • Right to equal protection by the law and non-discrimination • Right to seek redress and to an effective remedy • Right to a fair trial • Right to free choice of work • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work
Failure to intervene and investigate when sex workers experience and report violence	• Right to equal protection by the law and non-discrimination • Right to life, liberty and security of person • Right to freedom from unlawful interference • Right to protection from violence • Right to seek redress and to an effective remedy • Right to access to individual/collective complaints mechanisms • Right to a fair trial • Right to safe, just and favourable conditions of work"

POLICING (AND) ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Guided by the central question about the role of policing in sex workers' access to justice, our findings demonstrate that repressive and punishment-oriented policing constitutes a major barrier to justice for sex workers in Europe.

UNDER-REPORTING OF CRIMES AGAINST SEX WORKERS

Our data reflects well-documented trends of under-reporting violence and crime to the police by sex worker communities (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Bowen *et al.*, 2021; Crago *et al.*, 2021; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Struyf, 2022). Only 40.7% of participants indicated that they would reach out to the police to ensure safety for themselves and their colleagues. One of the primary reasons for this reluctance is the fear of punishment – such as mistreatment, physical violence, financial penalties, loss of custody, deportation, and administrative or criminal charges – if they seek help from the police or the criminal justice system. Previous experiences and the expectation of stigmatisation and discrimination also play a significant role in deterring sex workers from reporting violence or seeking protection from the police. Mistrust of the police and fear of being dismissed and neglected are very common among our participants. Building on their own encounters with law enforcement and drawing from the experiences of their colleagues, many sex workers feel they would not be recognised as citizens with equal rights or treated with the care and protection they deserve. Past and anticipated experiences of police inaction, failure to intervene, and dismissive behaviour are further reasons to avoid contact with the police. Many sex workers decide not to engage with law enforcement when harmed or violated, fearing further violence, harassment, and likely re-traumatisation at the hands of the police, if they file a complaint. Hence, repressive laws, punitive attitudes, and the stigmatisation and discrimination entrenched in policing practices push sex workers away from the protective mechanisms granted by the state, effectively barring them from accessing justice.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST VICTIMS

As this report documents, sex workers' fears and concerns about reporting violence to the police are well-founded. Over 70% of participants who had contact with the police as victims of crime experienced discrimination and mistreatment. When seeking help, sex workers are not afforded the dignity, respect, and trust that other citizens can take for granted. They are often not taken seriously or listened to, and their claims and victimisation are undermined, denied, or ridiculed. This is a common experience of sex workers operating across all legal models. Furthermore, it is very common for the police to normalise and dismiss the violence and harassment faced by sex workers, viewing it as an inherent part of their job. This leads to the construction of sex workers as responsible for or deserving of the harm inflicted on them. Victim blaming and other forms of discriminatory treatment further contribute to police inaction when sex workers seek help or police intervention. Police often absolve themselves of the responsibility to protect sex workers by ignoring calls for help, overlooking violence they witnessed, or refusing to record sex workers' reports or prosecute offenders. In many cases, sex workers who face violence or assault are not only mistreated, disciplined, or neglected by the police but also further punished through police abuse, violence, prosecution, or deportation. Hence, for sex workers across Europe, calling the police for help or filing a complaint as a victim of crime carries a serious risk of incrimination and further victimisation.

VIOLATION OF VICTIMS' RIGHTS

This research also found that, beyond discrimination, neglect, and mistreatment, sex workers are consistently denied their basic rights as victims of crime. In violation of the EU Victims' Rights Directive and the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, sex workers who come into contact with the police as victims of crime are systematically deprived of proper protection and support to which they are entitled. Many sex workers are neither offered psychological or medical services, nor do they have access to victim compensation. They are rarely given information on their rights as victims of crime or provided with legal aid – both essential for fully accessing justice. For migrant sex workers, the lack of interpreters and information in their own language represents another barrier to receiving protection. These rights violations occur across all legal settings and constitute serious miscarriages of justice, further marginalising sex worker communities in Europe and exposing them to violence.

DISCRIMINATION AND RIGHTS VIOLATIONS UPON DETENTION AND ARREST

As highlighted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, individuals targeted as offenders are vulnerable to rights violations, violence, abuse, and discriminatory treatment by law enforcement and the criminal justice system (FRA, 2016, 2019). This is particularly true for multiply marginalised and criminalised communities, such as sex workers, who are exposed to harsh policing and punitive approaches by the police. Our evidence demonstrates that sex workers across all legal settings experience mistreatment, harassment, and discrimination by

the police during arrest and detention. Many also endure physical and sexualised violence, emotional abuse, threats, blackmail, and intimidation, either at police stations or while in detention. When detained, arrested, and charged with offences or crimes, sex workers are frequently denied fundamental rights guaranteed by international human rights treaties and a number of EU directives designed to safeguard the rights of individuals suspected of crimes or subjected to criminal proceedings, including the right to be informed of the reasons for arrest and detention, the right to be presumed innocent, and the right to be treated with dignity. Our findings also highlight the systematic violation of sex workers' rights to a lawyer and legal aid, to communicate with their family, and to be provided with interpretation and translation. As a result, when subjected to lawful or arbitrary arrest, detention, or administrative or criminal charges, sex workers are effectively denied equal status before the law and deprived of the basic protections to which they are entitled.

POLICING (AND) SAFETY

An extensive body of research documents the negative impact of criminalisation and repressive policing on sex workers' safety, health, well-being, and access to support services as well as their vulnerability to violence and harassment (Oliveira *et al.*, 2023; Platt *et al.*, 2018; Vuolajärvi, 2022). While the aim of this research was to examine the role of policing on sex workers' access to justice, the adverse effect of abusive law enforcement practices on sex workers' working and living conditions emerged repeatedly in our interviews. Our findings reaffirm existing evidence about the harms of repressive policing and unfavourable policies, which exacerbate risks to sex workers' safety and increase their vulnerability at work.

DANGEROUS WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Abusive, punishment-oriented policing creates dangerous work environments for sex workers across all legal settings. In contexts where sex workers are directly penalised – whether through prohibitions on soliciting or through various administrative laws and by-laws used to target them – the risk of sudden police intervention and punishment lead to rushed negotiations with clients, increasing sex workers' vulnerability to harassment and abuse. Policing and intense surveillance targeting outdoor sex work venues further compromise sex workers' safety by displacing them to remote, unfamiliar, and unsafe locations, where it is more difficult to screen clients and seek help when in danger. Our data shows that police-enforced displacement to isolated, dangerous areas makes sex workers easy targets for predation by violent clients and passers-by. Excessive policing and punishment measures targeting sex workers' workplaces, third parties, and co-workers has a similar effect by intensifying surveillance and leading to the closure of indoor venues. This, in turn, results in displacement, loss of income, and diminished livelihoods. The broad scope of brothel-keeping and third-party laws also puts sex workers who work collectively or cooperatively at risk of punishment, forcing them into insolation and depriving them of any means of support from colleagues, security, or venue managers (Brouwers, 2023; McBride, 2021; NSWP, 2024; Vuolajärvi, 2022). When isolated and alone, sex workers are more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and abuse.

Our findings also reinforce existing evidence of the negative impact of client criminalisation and policing on sex workers' safety and working conditions (Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity, 2019; Le Bail *et al.*, 2019; McBride, 2021; Vuolajärvi, 2022). Law enforcement measures targeting sex buyers pushes sex work into more clandestine, isolated settings, weakening sex workers' bargaining power with clients. When criminalised, clients rush negotiations, seek to move transactions out of public areas, or avoid safer locations like parlours, bars, and hotels, instead preferring locations of their own choosing. This deprives sex workers of control over their work arrangements and safety protocols, and puts them at risk of violence. Even in regulated contexts, sex workers who do not or cannot comply with state-imposed conditions, such as those related to marital or migration status, registration, or sexual health screenings, are at risk of incrimination and punishment, which forces them into unsafe working conditions and exposes them to abuse.

INCREASED RISK OF VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Repressive, punishment-oriented policing and limited access to justice due to abusive law enforcement strategies put sex workers across legal settings at increased risk of violence and harassment. Beyond creating dangerous work environments and compromised safety for sex workers, abusive policing deprives sex workers of means to protect themselves against violence, exploitation, and abuse by clients, people posing as clients, third parties, and passers-by. Fear of legal repercussions, mistreatment upon reporting violence, and inaction of police officers – who often side with perpetrators – means that violent clients and other offenders frequently go unpunished. This creates a sense of impunity and conditions for predation, where many perpetrators, aware of sex workers' reluctance to report incidents and the police's unwillingness to investigate crimes against them, exploit these vulnerabilities, convinced they are more likely to get away with violence (Campbell & Sanders, 2021; Kinnell, 2008). Our findings also demonstrate that widespread mistreatment and violence, often condoned by the police themselves, contribute to the normalisation of the violence to which sex workers are subjected (Crago *et al.*, 2021; Struyf, 2022). When systematically abused by law enforcement officials themselves, sex workers are perceived as easy targets of abuse for other perpetrators, which, in turn, increases the risk of violence. As documented in this report, across all legal contexts, the normalisation of police violence even allows violent individuals to impersonate police officers and coerce sex workers into unwanted or unpaid sex.

DETERIORATION OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Existing research demonstrates that repressive policing not only increases the risk of violence against sex workers but is also linked to a higher incidence of mental and physical health issues (Macioti *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Platt *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, our data shows that exposure to policing, violence, mistreatment, discrimination, and abuse by the police, clients, and others takes a heavy psychological toll on sex workers, leading to fear, anxiety, depression, and trauma. Limited access to justice and exclusion from state protective mechanisms contribute to a sense of isolation and abandonment. Beyond the mental health impacts, criminalisation, repressive policing, and associated violence heighten sex workers' vulnerability to HIV and other STIs, while also limiting their access to health and support services. Law enforcement strategies, such as confiscation and destruction of safer sex materials like condoms or lube, or using condoms

as evidence against sex workers, have been documented in several countries under study. These practices are particularly harmful, as they punish sex workers for adopting safety measures, discourage them from carrying condoms, and increase their vulnerability to infections or unwanted pregnancies (Collier, 2014; EATG, 2018; HRW, 2012; LSHTM, 2018).

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Our findings also demonstrate that repressive law enforcement drives sex workers into poverty and socio-economic precarity. The surveillance of their venues, displacement to remote and unsafe locations, and systematic policing make it more difficult for sex workers to achieve economic security. Raids, punitive measures, and deterrence interventions, along with the closure of workspaces, force sex workers into precarious working conditions. This creates job instability and pushes sex workers into situations where they are unable to secure a stable income or even predict whether they will earn any money at all. As a result, sex workers across Europe experience significant financial pressure, potentially compelling them to work more than they would otherwise. The systematic imposition of fines, confiscation of assets, and extortion further exacerbate economic hardship and financial insecurity. These practices force sex workers to increase their workload or operate in less secure conditions in order to pay fines or compensate for income lost to extortion and confiscations. Policing-induced financial pressure often makes sex workers more reliant on sex work to recover losses and sustain their livelihoods, trapping them in a cycle of debt and poverty. This also leaves sex workers more vulnerable to exploitative third parties, clients, and police, creating an environment ripe for abuse, threats, and coercion. Our data also indicates that economic insecurity adversely affects sex workers' decision-making, as they may be forced to see clients or provide services they would otherwise refuse, exposing them to abuse and other health risks.

MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

Data gathered for this report also documents other knock-on effects of criminalisation and policing on various aspects of sex workers' lives. Legal models that criminalise or strictly regulate sex work push sex workers into illegality and marginalise them from society, denying them access to rights and state protections. Across Europe, sex workers are deprived of civil and labour rights, access to support services, and the recognition and social benefits available to other citizens. The stigma embedded in those legal frameworks, reinforced through law enforcement strategies, legitimises and perpetuates the discrimination sex workers face from family, friends, partners, and the media as well as within institutional settings such as the criminal justice system, healthcare, education, and other sectors of the labour market. Repressive laws and policing contribute to severe personal and social consequences for sex workers, such as having their children removed from their care and being fired from non-sex-work-related jobs. Sex workers are being evicted and deprived of housing, with police deliberately outing them to their landlords. Sex workers are doxxed by law enforcement and then shunned from their neighbourhoods, families, and communities. Due to multiple forms of criminalisation and harsh policing, sex workers are being detained, deported, and estranged from their social networks. Harmful sex work policies and repressive policing not only perpetuate this isolation, marginalisation, and discrimination, but also actively sanction and sustain them.

SEX WORKERS ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR SEX WORKERS

Across all legal contexts and sex worker communities under study, participants expressed fear, aversion, and distrust of the police. Attitudes towards the police were categorised as mostly negative and very negative. Those attitudes reflect sex workers' experiences with repressive policing and the detrimental treatment to which they are exposed when they come into contact with the police. The vast majority of sex workers asserted that the police are not concerned with their safety, but are instead focused on surveilling, controlling, and prosecuting their communities. Participants described being treated by police as 'trash,' 'dirt,' 'nothing,' 'non-humans,' or villains deserving of violence. They did not feel respected, protected, cared for, or heard, but rather abandoned and targeted for punishment, mistreatment, and abuse. For most participants, being around the police equated to feelings of injustice and insecurity. In their demands for safety and access to justice, sex workers did not call for more policing or an increased police presence. On the contrary, they sought alternatives.

DECRIMINALISE SEX WORK

The overwhelming majority of participants identified the repeal of all harmful and repressive laws targeting sex workers, their workplaces, co-workers, third parties, and clients as the most urgent and immediate measure needed to safeguard their safety and access to justice. The decriminalisation of sex work, or the removal of laws that expose sex workers and their immediate environments to harsh policing and punishment, was seen as the main way to address the significant power imbalance between sex workers and law enforcement and reduce police violence. The criminalisation and penalisation of sex work, along with related law enforcement strategies, were discussed as major barriers that deter sex workers from reporting violence and other crimes to the police, while also facilitating mistreatment from law enforcement officers. By calling for the decriminalisation of sex work and an end to repressive policing, sex workers were demanding respect for the human, labour, and civil rights to which they are entitled as humans and workers. They also called for equality before the law and access to the protections granted to other citizens, from which they are currently excluded. Participants further demanded the decriminalisation of migration and rights-based approaches to addressing work-related risks as a way forward to prevent miscarriages of justice against sex worker communities.

ABOLISH, REFORM, EDUCATE, HOLD ACCOUNTABLE

Our data reveals a diversity of opinions among sex workers on how to address over-policing, police abuse, and violence. Some participants saw the police as an irredeemably corrupt and violent institution that needs to be abolished if sex workers' access to justice, rights, and safety are to be achieved. They highlighted the inherently oppressive nature of policing, the widespread and systemic abuse of power by officers, and the role of law enforcement in perpetuating violence and harm against sex workers and other marginalised communities, calling for the urgent dismantling of police forces. Other sex workers advocated for a radical transformation of the police and policing practices to improve sex workers' safety and access to justice. A number of participants envisioned police reform through better training, which would

sensitise law enforcement officials to sex workers' needs and vulnerabilities. Such training was seen as essential for guaranteeing anti-discrimination and anti-violence protections when sex workers come into contact with the police. Other participants called for dedicated non-carceral and rights-based police support and protection for sex workers, in place of the surveillance and punishment-oriented policing to which they are currently exposed. However, some expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of sensitivity training for police officers in addressing systemic stigmatisation and repression. Instead, they proposed significantly reducing police powers and introducing oversight mechanisms that would hold law enforcement officers accountable for abuses of power, corruption, and acts of violence against sex workers and other over-policed communities.

KEY ROLE OF COMMUNITY-LED ORGANISATIONS

Our findings highlight the importance of sex worker-led organisations and community support in eradicating barriers to sex workers' access to justice. This includes the need for community oversight of policing strategies, as well as dialogue and cooperation between sex worker-led organisations and the police through targeted training and awareness-raising campaigns for police forces. Some participants viewed these sex worker-led organisations as a potential and much needed firewall between them and law enforcement officials, with their involvement seen as a protective measure against police violence and abuse. Indeed, our data demonstrates the critical role of community, political organising, and sex worker-led organisations as key resources in helping sex workers access justice, be protected, stay safe, and become more knowledgeable about their rights. The presence of advocates and mediators in police settings was identified as crucial in helping sex workers report violence, seek justice, and have their rights met, both as victims of a crime and when targeted as offenders. Police officers' behaviour was reported to be significantly more humane when sex workers had a witness present, such as a lawyer or a member of a human rights organisation. Sex worker collectives across the region also played a pivotal role in providing access to legal services and comprehensive support for sex workers, whether they were victims or targeted as offenders. For many participants, community-led organisations and support networks, rather than the police, were the first point of contact in an emergency.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE FOR SEX WORKERS

This report demonstrates the violence and harms faced by sex workers in Europe as a result of policing, highlighting the key role it plays in restricting their access to justice and legal protection. It clearly shows that abusive policing strategies are a direct manifestation of the criminalisation of sex work and other discriminatory laws, as well as of the prejudices against sex workers and other marginalised communities that are firmly embedded in policing structures. The report also points to the inherent dangers of policing and the failures of states and criminal justice systems to ensure equal access to justice and rights for all. Therefore, our policy recommendations are not straightforward, quick fixes; the report underscores that the issue lies not in the failures of individuals within the system, but in the failures of the system itself.

Sex workers' lack of access to justice occurs within a broader context of ever-expanding police powers and an increasing reliance on punitive criminal law, often at the expense of social justice and access to rights. Much like the racial justice movement, the intersectional movement, and the Black feminist movement, we are coming to the realisation that Europe needs to open up a debate about the meaning and role of policing and criminal law in our societies, and explore alternatives for protecting communities, especially those that are excluded and marginalised, such as sex workers (Davis *et al.*, 2022; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Mac & Smith, 2018, Struzik *et al.*, 2024). We urgently need to initiate discussions around a transformative justice approach as an alternative to traditional policing and criminal justice systems in addressing the violence, harm, and abuse faced by marginalised communities. A transformative justice framework seeks to respond to violence and injustice without creating more violence and oppression (brown, 2020; Kaba, 2021; Mingus, 2019). It is a political project aimed at addressing the underlying conditions that perpetuate harm and injustice, while preventing harm without relying on state structures such as police, prisons, and the criminal justice system as primary tools. Responses to violence through policing and criminal justice measures frequently reproduce violence and traumatise those subjected to them, as demonstrated by this research. It is also important to note that while many people may choose not to call the police, many communities, as documented in the report, are unable to do so due to fears of retribution, harassment, incrimination, state-sanctioned violence, sexualised violence, and previous negative experiences (Mingus, 2019; Stardust *et al.*, 2021). As a result, they are left without access to justice or any form of support.

Hence, a key component of the transformative justice approach is the decriminalisation of sex work and the repeal of all criminal laws that harm sex worker communities. The research report confirms the intersectional feminist premise that increased criminalisation, policing, and state power render certain communities more vulnerable to violence in general, and that increased criminalisation often puts these same communities at risk of state violence (Bernstein, 2012; Gruber, 2020; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). Europe, being the cradle of the Swedish model, fosters a hostile political environment that links sex work with human trafficking or violence against women. This only legitimises campaigns that exclude and marginalise sex workers' rights defenders from the political agenda, and discourages sex workers from engaging with state structures, including the police. The full decriminalisation of sex work is the only policy that can lead to genuinely positive outcomes for sex workers (Council of Europe Commissioner of Human Rights, 2024; NSWP, 2020; UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023; UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls, 2023). It is also the first prerequisite for police forces to address the prejudice and discrimination embedded in their ranks and policies, and for support services to adequately serve sex workers and other marginalised communities.

The transformative justice approach also necessitates addressing the abuse of police powers and the lack of police accountability (Duff, 2021; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Moore, 2022; Vitale, 2018). The on-the-ground evidence captured by this research demonstrates the abusive and violent nature of policing, the extent of police corruption, and the often arbitrary, discriminatory, and disproportionate character of law enforcement. Our findings also suggest that efforts to curb abuse of police powers through reforms – such as increasing police diversity, implementing community policing practices, establishing codes of ethics, and providing training – may have only limited positive effects. Many of the reforms are designed to prevent police and officers from abusing individual human rights, yet they fail to fully address the systemic patriarchal, racist,

xenophobic, and homophobic policies and policing strategies that lead to the incrimination and targeting of entire groups. Police violence is a structural problem that requires structural interventions, including the reduction of police powers and a decrease in the size, scope, and influence of policing in society. Along these lines, advocates of the transformative justice approach call for the eradication of police powers and the reallocation of police funding to non-carceral and social justice-oriented services, such as housing, education, healthcare, welfare benefits, and, most importantly, community-led support (Duff, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Maher, 2021).

Divesting from policing is a strategy that involves locating resources in communities and community-based alternatives to policing called for by our participants. Transformative justice prioritises investment in communities and is based on the premise that communities – whether well-organised civil society organisations, less structured community-based organisations, family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, and so on – are better able to recognise, respond to, and address violence (ENAR, 2021). Community organising and mutual support are among the most effective strategies for changing social conditions and preventing harm (Moore, 2021; Spade, 2020). Sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are particularly well-suited to support their communities, promote and share knowledge about their rights, shape sex work related-policies, and develop bottom-up responses to challenges faced by sex workers on the ground (Stevenson & Dziuban, 2018). Embedded in the lived experiences of their communities, sex worker-led organisations and initiatives are best positioned to ensure support, safety, accountability, and change for sex workers across Europe. They also play crucial roles in improving sex workers' access to justice and equality before the law (NSWP, 2020).

Hence, the transformative justice approach to ensure sex workers' access to justice involves several steps, including the decriminalisation of sex work; the repeal of excessive police powers and divesting from policing; and investing in community-led responses to rights violations, violence, and harm. As we mentioned above, this is not a simple, quick, or easy process and requires the involvement of many different stakeholders. We take this opportunity to outline the key priorities that emerge from our research for the upcoming priorities of EU institutions, including the European Parliament, the European Commission, and other relevant EU agencies, as well as the Council of Europe, national stakeholders, and ally organisations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU

- Although the EU does not have a direct mandate to address sex work policies under the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, it does have a mandate to enforce the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. EU Member States' policies on sex work often result in violations of the rights enshrined in the Charter, and from this perspective, the EU has a mandate to work with its Member States to ensure their policies comply with the Charter. In this regard, we strongly urge the newly appointed European Commission and the European Parliament to encourage EU agencies, such as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the European Institute for Gender Equality, to allocate resources and capacities to research police violence against sex workers and explore alternatives to policing and criminal justice systems, including the transformative justice approach.

- We call on the European Commission and the European Parliament to meaningfully engage with the most marginalised communities, including sex workers, before developing new EU strategies and action plans. Especially the new Gender Equality Strategy, the Victims' Rights Strategy, the EU Action Plan against Racism, the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, the EU Anti-Trafficking Strategy, and other relevant initiatives must prioritise the rights of the most marginalised communities, including sex workers of colour, sex workers with disabilities, migrants, LGBTIQ individuals, and the most vulnerable sex workers. We also urge the European Commission and the European Parliament to critically examine the role of policing and over-criminalisation in their policy documents, and to highlight the contribution of communities in transformative justice processes. An intersectional approach must be mainstreamed across all EU strategies.
- We urge the European Commission and the European Parliament to promote police accountability to protect marginalised communities and individuals facing intersectional discrimination from crime, and to promote the implementation of all provisions in the Victims' Rights Directive, particularly those related to marginalised communities.
- We also urge the newly appointed European Commission and the European Parliament to critically review the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, as well as other initiatives that seek to further criminalise migration across the EU. These measures are likely to increase the vulnerability of migrants and may lead to more discriminatory practices within the very institutions, including the police, that are meant to protect everyone. We call for the introduction of safe reporting mechanisms for undocumented migrants and migrants providing sexual services, which are largely lacking across Europe. In some EU Member States, the provision of sexual services can be ground for detention and deportation, even for legally residing migrants. Safe reporting mechanisms are almost non-existent for victims of abuse in immigration detention centres. To uphold the principle of non-discrimination in the EU Victims' Rights Directive, it is crucial to ensure that all individuals across the EU are able to report a crime without fear of retaliation, regardless of their migration status. This concept of non-punishment, as outlined in the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive and the EU Anti-Trafficking Strategy, should also be reinforced in the EU Victims' Rights Directive and the new EU Victims' Rights Strategy.
- In addition, we call on the European Commission and the European Parliament to ensure secure and confidential mechanisms for the reporting of crimes committed by public officials to the relevant independent authorities.
- We urge the European Parliament to draft a human rights-based resolution on the rights of sex workers, advocating for the full decriminalisation of sex work and the prioritisation of a transformative justice approach with respect to sex work.
- We also call on the European Commission to include an intersectional approach that centres multiply marginalised communities, including sex workers, in EU funding mechanisms. A transformative justice approach must be incorporated into funding programmes such as CERV, JUST, and AMIF, as well as their equivalents. These funding mechanisms need to be made accessible to the most marginalised communities, such as sex workers, who often have limited resources to access such funding. High levels of bureaucracy, administrative complexity, and biasses from the experts evaluating the proposals act as barriers, preventing these communities, who are best positioned to support their constituents, from accessing EU funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

- We urge the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to adopt a new resolution that takes a human rights-based approach to sex work, condemns the impact of criminalising various aspects of sex work, and calls for the full decriminalisation of sex work. This resolution should be drafted with the meaningful participation of sex workers and take into account the existing evidence and research, as well as the recent comments of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights and the findings of the European Court of Human Rights.
- We call on expert groups that monitor the implementation of Member States' obligations under the Istanbul Convention (Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, GREVIO) and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Persons (GRETA) to actively and meaningfully involve sex worker communities in their monitoring missions. These expert groups should pay increased attention to the interactions between sex workers from diverse backgrounds, including racialised, LGBTI, or migrant sex workers, as well as sex workers who use drugs, and law enforcement, including the police. They should also highlight the impact of prostitution and migration policies on the attitudes and biasses of state actors, including the police, and their impact on the ability of sex workers and other marginalised communities to rely on the criminal justice system. We urge these experts to adopt an intersectional approach and reflect on the role of communities as agents of transformative justice in their missions and reports.
- We call on the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) to address intersectional discrimination and hatred against sex workers, including racialised, migrant, and LGBTI sex workers, and to focus on the structural discrimination and police violence targeting these communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

- We urge national governments and policymakers to actively pursue the full decriminalisation of sex work, including the repealing of punitive laws targeting sex workers, their clients, and third parties, and to prioritise a transformative justice approach to sex work, migration, and drug use.
- We also call for investment in education and sensitivity training for law enforcement officers, judges, and others working in the criminal justice system. Reducing bias and discrimination is essential to securing sex workers' access to justice.
- We urge national governments and policymakers to hold law enforcement officers accountable for acts of violence and abuse against sex workers, and to ensure that victims of police violence have an enforceable right to compensation. Policing strategies should not single out marginalised communities, including migrant and sex workers in the open scene, and must not be enacted in an arbitrary, discriminatory, or disproportionate manner. Police officers who engage in unjustified and illegitimate violence based on profiling and prejudice should be held accountable and adequately prosecuted. Police violence should be recognised as a systemic issue and addressed by the state.
- We call on national governments and policymakers to fund community-led services and meaningfully engage with sex worker-led organisations in shaping policy responses to the violence and abuses faced by sex worker communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALLY ORGANISATIONS

- We call on all European-level organisations working to advance the rights and position of marginalised and discriminated groups to unite in promoting a transformative justice approach. Transformative justice focuses on enhancing the capacities, accountability, resilience, and safety of communities, recognising that they are best positioned to address harm and violence, especially against their most marginalised members. The transformative justice approach requires that communities are supported and not criminalised. Therefore, we urge ally organisations to support our efforts to demand and promote the full decriminalisation of sex work.
- We urge you to take an active interest in how the issue addressed by your organisation intersects with sex workers' rights.
- We urge you to encourage your member organisations to actively engage with local sex worker communities or organisations, and support them by offering your cooperation and expertise. When meeting with other partners, do not hesitate to voice the demands of sex worker rights organisations. Facilitate connections between sex worker organisations and policymakers, local governments, and state institutions. However, prioritise the safety of the respective sex worker organisations and always consult with them before taking action.
- We urge you to be inclusive of sex workers. They possess in-depth knowledge of the issues that affect them and can offer valuable perspectives to your organisation as trainees, interns, consultants, or employees.

APPENDIX

COUNTRY PROFILES: LEGAL MODELS OF SEX WORK

The following pages outline sex work policies, applicable laws, and law enforcement strategies in each country under study. These country profiles were developed based on partner organisations' operational intelligence, expertise, and desk-based research on access to justice and policing. Our work also draws on existing academic research, grey literature, and other resources.

ARMENIA

In Armenia, the provision of sexual services is penalised under administrative law. Brothel keeping and third-party involvement are prohibited and criminalised. Our partner organisation, New Generation Humanitarian NGO (NGNGO), reports that women sex workers are subjected to physical and psychological violence by law enforcement. They are also forced to undergo STI examinations after being arrested on solicitation charges (Civilnet, 2013). As NGNGO reports, blackmail and threats by police remain a persistent problem for sex workers, with police officers extorting money or demanding sex, or threatening arrest if workers refuse to provide information about their clients or individuals involved in drug sales. All this is corroborated by our own findings. Male (both cis and trans) as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming sex workers also face transphobic and homophobic violence and threats by the public; however, police do not take these acts seriously and victims' rights are further violated if such cases do go to trial. NGNGO highlights that due to a pervasive culture of fear and mistrust of law enforcement, many marginalised communities, including LGBT individuals and sex workers, avoid interacting with authorities if possible. This makes it difficult to obtain an accurate understanding of the human rights violations occurring in Armenia.

BELGIUM

In June 2022, Belgium partially decriminalised sex work. Prior to this, sex work was either partially criminalised or regulated, with prostitution policies varying across different municipalities (David & Loopmans, 2018). Active public soliciting and advertising of sexual services were criminalised, but the provision of sexual services was not penalised, and sex workers were already subject to income tax. Although procuring and related activities, including running a brothel or exploiting the prostitution of others, were criminalised, some municipalities tolerated brothels and third-party arrangements. Renting rooms to sex workers (e.g. in hotels or apartments, or for window sex work) was also not penalised (David & Loopmans, 2018). The decriminalisation of sex work in Belgium came into effect on June 1, 2022. With this legal change, sex workers gained legal recognition as workers, along with social security and access to labour-related protections. Criminal sanctions against third parties were removed. Under

the new labour law for sex work, introduced in May 2024, sex workers are able to work with third parties under an employment contract (UTSOPI, n.d.). Our local partner organisations, Travailleu(r)ses du Sexe Organisé(e)s pour L'indépendance (UTSOPI) and ESPACE-P, note that while decriminalisation is a victory for sex workers' rights, further research is needed to assess the impact of these legislative changes on sex workers' safety and access to rights. Additionally, the move to decriminalise sex work does not protect undocumented migrants, a population that relies heavily on sex work, due to strict work permit requirements and an inaccessible formal labour market. The threat of deportation and other state-enforced harms (such as detention and fines) leaves undocumented migrants particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence (ESWA, 2016).

FRANCE

In France, selling sex itself is not penalised, but all related activities, such as brothel keeping, procuring, and soliciting, are prosecuted (Darley *et al.*, 2018). Buying sexual services has been penalised since April 2016. The criminalisation of clients, otherwise known as the Swedish model,[19] has had predictably harmful effects on sex workers (Le Bail *et al.*, 2019; Krüsi *et al.*, 2014; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Our partner organisation, Syndicat du Travail Sexuel (STRASS), also informs us of violent, repressive police behaviour encouraged by legislation granting more power to the police, restricting the right to protest, or making it unlawful to film police officers. Sex workers in France live under a number of laws that endanger them and enable widespread police brutality. Racism is equally common, with migrant communities being profiled and subjected to institutionalised violence.[20] The criminalisation of clients has, in fact, led to the increased repression of sex workers, who are more heavily policed and punished than their clients, the purported target of the law (Le Bail *et al.*, 2019). According to STRASS, sex workers' working and living conditions have considerably worsened, with their autonomy diminished and financial necessity forcing them to take greater risks (Le Bail *et al.*, 2019). The criminalisation of clients in France has led to increased poverty among sex workers, making them more reliant on sex work to secure their livelihood, and has shifted the power balance in favor of clients.

GREECE

Sex work in Greece is legal but so strictly regulated that working legally is nearly impossible and sex work is de facto criminalised. To maintain a license to practice sex work, which must be renewed every 3 years, individuals must meet the following conditions: they must be unmarried cis women and over 18 years old; have the legal right to live and work in Greece; not test positive for any STIs; not suffer from mental health issues or psychiatric disabilities; and not use illegal substances. Additionally, they must not have been convicted of crimes such as homicide, procuring, possession or production of child sexual abuse materials, human trafficking, robbery, or blackmail. There are no provisions for male sex workers and, by extension, trans people

19 Named as such because Sweden was the first country to implement this legislative framework. It is sometimes referred to as the 'Nordic' or the 'end demand' model.

20 For example, cases of deaths in custody, predominantly involved non-white populations and individuals living in poorer areas, as reported by STRASS in their desk-based research.

(whose gender is not fully recognised by the law), subjecting them to punishment for unauthorised provision of sexual services. Women are required to undergo a sexual health examination every 15 days, with the results permanently recorded in their medical history. Aside from the difficulty of maintaining an individual license, the only legal form of sex work in Greece is brothel-based work. A licence is required for properties to be legally recognised as brothels, with strict regulations governing the type and location of such premises. According to the Sex Workers' Empowerment Network (SWEN), as of May 2022, administrative authorities confirmed that no legal brothels were operating in Athens. This contrasts with the unlicenced 119 brothels and 5 studios reported by Red Umbrella Athens (RUA) as of September 2022. Bribes to the police are so common that sex workers are forced to set aside specific funds for them, with RUA reporting that these bribes can amount to as much as 2,000 euros per month. Police misconduct and brutality against sex workers are prevalent. Evidence published by Amnesty International (2012) and our partner organisations in Greece demonstrates that police presence is heaviest in low-income areas where migrants and refugees reside, and where sex work takes place. Police raids, arrests, and fines are frequent occurrences. Stop-and-frisk measures, which disproportionately target precarious, marginalised groups, increase the likelihood of fines, court summons, arrests, and detainment. Police misconduct, abuse, and brutality go largely unpunished, with instances of torture, inhumane treatment, and deaths in custody and detention (AI, 2012).

THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, sex work has been legal and regulated since 2000. To work legally, sex workers must comply with national and municipal licensing laws and regulations. National legislation requires sex workers to be over 18 years of age (though many cities have raised the minimum age to 21) and to provide sexual services without being coerced. Additionally, the Act on Migrant Workers prohibits the issuance of work permits to third-country nationals (i.e. non-EU citizens) for employment in the sex industry (Altink *et al.*, 2018). Local municipalities also have the authority to impose their own regulations, which may include mandatory reporting requirements to local authorities, vetting by officials, or choosing an 'opt-in arrangement', a hybrid form of self-employment and employment. This arrangement denies workers access to labour rights, making them reliant on 'operators' (Business.gov.nl, n.d.). Some local municipalities avoid issuing licences altogether, effectively bypassing the national law, which stipulates that a total ban would violate the right to free choice of employment enshrined in the Netherlands' constitution (Van Wijk *et al.*, 2014). Migrant workers and those who cannot afford or access the licensing system are excluded from legal work, thus creating a two-tier system for those who can work legally and those who cannot. The Sex Work Regulation Act, a new national bill currently under discussion, seeks to criminalise unregistered workers and their clients (Red Insight, n.d.). Sex workers in the Sex Workers Against Violence & Exploitation (SAVE) network have reported that operators of licensed workplaces often discourage workers from contacting the police to report violent clients, fearing that their establishments could lose their licences if deemed unsafe. According to SAVE, while sex workers with multiple intersecting identities face heightened social exclusion and discrimination, migrant workers experience racist and homophobic treatment at the hands of the police.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Selling sex is an administrative offence in North Macedonia. Additionally, all activities associated with sex work, including procuring, brothel keeping, and benefiting from sex workers' income, are illegal – except for the purchasing of sexual services. The Law on Prevention and Protection of Violence against Women recognises female sex workers as a vulnerable group, but excludes male and transgender sex workers. Soliciting, brothel keeping, and selling sexual services are penalised and heavily policed. The performance of sex work or 'resorting to prostitution' is classified as a violation of the Law on Misdemeanours Against the Public Order. The Criminal Code criminalises 'mediation in prostitution,' stipulating that anyone who recruits, instigates, stimulates, or entices another person to engage in prostitution, or in any way facilitates the handing over of a person to someone for the purpose of prostitution, shall be sentenced to imprisonment of 5 to 10 years. Marginalised communities in North Macedonia face intersectional discrimination and stigmatisation from both law enforcement and the public. A study conducted by HOPS found that 62% of sex worker respondents had experienced at least one problem with the police (Cekovski & Dimitrievski, 2018). Police presence is more concentrated in areas where marginalised communities live and work.

POLAND

In Poland, the provision of sexual services is neither criminalised nor penalised. However, the Code of Petty Offences penalises active solicitation, a regulation frequently used to police and punish sex workers who work in the open scene (Dziuban, 2024b; Ratecka, 2023). Sex workers working in the open scene are also targeted by laws punishing loitering, public indecency, and violations of the public order. Non-coercive labour relations and all third-party activities – including owning or managing sex work venues; hiring sex workers; and providing any kind of services such as transportation, advertising, or facilitating client contact – are criminal offences. Sex workers may also be subjected to criminalisation for any mutual support and cooperative work arrangements (Dziuban 2024b; Ratecka 2023). The criminalisation of sex work workplaces and labour arrangements exposes sex workers and sex work venues in Poland to intense surveillance and policing. Police presence in sex work spaces often involves ID checks, searches, intimidation, abuse, income confiscation, arbitrary detentions, and even prosecutions. Under the Polish Personal Income Tax Act, prostitution is exempt from taxation on moral grounds. Due to this exemption, sex work is not legally recognised as a legitimate income-generating activity or as legal ground for (self-)employment. This exemption prevents sex workers from paying taxes, accessing health insurance, or claiming benefits such as sick leave, holiday leave, or maternity leave, and denies them access to pension benefits (Dziuban, 2024a; Ratecka, 2023). Since sex work is not recognised as legitimate work or ground for legal employment, migrant sex workers cannot regularise their entry and stay based on their occupation. This leaves them particularly vulnerable to policing and bordering strategies in sex work venues, exposing them to surveillance, prosecution, and deportations (Dziuban 2024a; Struzik *et al.*; 2024).

SPAIN

In Spain, the provision of sexual services is neither regulated nor prohibited. It's 'extralegal', i.e. it takes place outside legal control. Article 188 is the only provision in the Criminal Code that addresses adult prostitution and holds that third-party management of sex work can result in a fine and a prison sentence of up to 4 years. The regulation of sex work varies by local municipality. Certain local authorities prohibit open-scene work, imposing fines on sex workers, clients, or both. In certain regions, brothels are tolerated as long as no clear exploitation is evident, although the legal concept of exploitation is not clearly defined in Spanish law. Under the pretext of searching for trafficking victims, police regularly subject brothel-based sex workers to arbitrary raids and harassment. There have been recent attempts to criminalise buyers and third parties, an effort that is "more ideologically driven than the result of a rigorous study of the reality or the evidence regarding the current situation in sex work and needs of sex workers" (Meneses-Falcón & Rúa-Vieites, 2023: 1471). Since 2015, the police have been granted more powers under the Citizen Security Law. As reported by our partner organisation, Comité de Apoyo a las Trabajadoras del Sexo (CATS), this law allows police officers to detain citizens for 'indecent behaviour' or 'disobedience'. Migrants, particularly if they are undocumented or racialised, face widespread repression by the police. The Roma community, open-scene workers, trans women, and people who use drugs also experience frequent police harassment. SOS Racismo, a human rights NGO in Spain, documented 571 cases of police brutality over the past 20 years, though only a few have made it to court (Antequera, 2020).

SWEDEN

In 1999, Sweden became the first country to implement a law criminalising sex workers' clients (Östergren, 2018; Vuolajärvi, 2022). Celebrated as a solution to trafficking and exploitation, the criminalisation of sex buyers has widespread cultural support in Sweden and is promoted transnationally by legislators and policymakers as a strategy to suppress demand for prostitution. Individuals caught purchasing sex can be fined and imprisoned for up to a year, and even the intention to buy sex is punishable. The Swedish Penal Code criminalises all third-party relations, including brothel keeping and providing security, advertising, or transportation services to sex workers. These provisions also apply to landlords who rent out flats or premises to sex workers. Landlords are granted the right to terminate tenants' contracts if they provide sexual services at their properties (Östergren, 2018). Brothel-keeping and third-party laws prevent sex workers from working together safely, and they are used to evict them from their homes. Despite this, the provision of sexual services is neither criminalised nor penalised, and income earned from sex work is subject to taxation. Under the Aliens Act, migrants without residence permits, except for citizens of the European Economic Area, can be refused entry to Sweden if suspected of providing sexual services. Our partner organisation, Red Umbrella Sweden (RUS), reports that sex workers are subjected to police surveillance and operations targeting their clients and third parties. Migrant sex workers of colour, especially women from African and Asian countries, or from outside of the EU, are the main targets of these policing interventions. They are systematically controlled at borders and deported following raids on sex work venues.

SWITZERLAND

In Switzerland, sex work is legalised (Chimienti & Bugon, 2018). The Federal Penal Code establishes minimal rules regarding sex work, specifying that it can only be performed voluntarily, i.e. free from coercion or exploitation, by persons over the age of 18. While sex work is not recognised as a profession or a form of employment, meaning that sex workers must be self-employed, it is subject to taxation and social insurance contributions. The Penal Code also states that "the conditions of prostitution – the place, time, and activity – can be defined at the cantonal level", thereby granting 26 Swiss cantons discretion over sex work policy (Chimienti & Bugon, 2018: 137–138). As a result, the regulation of sex work differs from canton to canton, and, in some cases, even between municipalities within the same canton. Sex workers in our partner organisation, ProCoRe, describe this as a 'legal patchwork' with high bureaucratic hurdles. To date, 8 cantons have introduced specific regulations for sex work, including requirements for sex workers or owners of sex work venues to register with the police and finance department. Failure to register may result in punishment for the unauthorised provision of sexual services, typically in the form of fines. Several cantons and cities permit street-based sex work or have created authorised zones on the outskirts of cities, like in the case of Zurich. Similarly to the situation in the Netherlands, these restrictive sex work regulations create a two-tier system for those who can work legally and those who are punished for violating the law. According to ProCoRe, sex work-related restrictions are also used to target undocumented and irregular migrants (see also Chimienti & Bugon, 2018). Migrant sex workers, particularly trans women and sex workers of colour, are heavily policed both on the street and online. They are often fined for not having a prostitution permit, soliciting in prohibited areas, or lacking proper documents. In some cases, they are even deported and banned from re-entry.

UNITED KINGDOM

While the provision of sex sexual services is legal in the UK, virtually all activities in which sex workers engage to contact clients are criminalised. Laws criminalising loitering and soliciting in the street or at public spaces are routinely used to police, displace, detain, and prosecute sex workers (Campbell *et al.*, 2018; Elmes *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, civil orders, such as anti-social behaviour orders and public space protection orders, are frequently used to target sex workers working in the open scene. Our partner organisation, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), reports that cautions, arrests, or displacements from work locations increase the risk of violence from clients and others, including the police. Sex workers' safety is further compromised by laws penalising 'curb-crawling' (soliciting of sex workers by clients in public spaces), which contribute to rushed negotiations and limit sex workers' ability to effectively screen clients. All third-party sex worker relations are criminalised, including brothel keeping, managing or assisting in the operation of a brothel, or providing sex workers with security or support. As a result, sex workers who work together for safety or share premises (even if they work in rotation and do not meet there) can face criminal charges for brothel keeping. Raids on sex work venues are common and often result in the closure of premises and the confiscation of sex workers' assets and other valuables (Mullin, 2016). Migrant sex workers are systematically targeted for deportation, particularly following Brexit, which has fuelled xenophobic and racist sentiments in the country (Connelly & ECP, 2020). ECP further reports that sex workers are exposed to police repression and encounter numerous barriers to accessing justice, including discrimination, abuse, and neglect when reporting violence (ECP, 2022). The expansion of police powers in the UK is a worrying development, with the 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill criminalising protests, increasing stop-and-search powers, and criminalising Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities.

TABLES

TABLE 6: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLICE (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: What is your attitude towards police?

n=160		Very negative and negative	Complicated	Neutral	Positive and very positive
Overall for participants		68.8%	5.6%	13.8%	10.0%
Legal models and demographic markers					
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	60.6%	0.0%	21.2%	15.2%
	Swedish model	72.2%	11.1%	16.7	0.0%
	Partial criminalisation	78.9%	7.0%	7.0%	5.3%
	Regulation	61.5%	5.8%	15.4%	15.4%
Work setting	Open scene	59.4%	9.4%	12.5%	12.5%
	Closed scene	69.3%	6.8%	12.5%	11.4%
	Both	79.4%	0.0%	14.7%	2.9%
Working arrangement	Independent	61.8%	6.9%	16.7%	11.8%
	Under management or both	83.6%	1.8%	9.1%	5.5%
Gender identity	Cis women	66.7%	3.7%	15.7%	11.1%
	Trans women	68.6%	11.4%	8.6%	11.4%
	Cis men	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%	0.0%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	65.7%	5.9%	13.7%	11.8%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	77.4%	5.7%	13.2%	3.8%
Migration status	Migrants	61.8%	9.1%	12.7%	12.7%
	Non-migrants	74.5%	4.1%	13.3%	7.1%

TABLE 7: POLICE CONCERN FOR SEX WORKERS' SAFETY (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: Have the police ever shown concern for your safety?

n=186		Yes	No
Overall for participants		**25.3%**	**69.9%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	17.5%	77.5%
	Swedish model	33.3%	63.0%
	Partial criminalisation	17.5%	80.7%
	Regulation	33.9%	58.1%
Work setting	Open scene	27.8%	69.4%
	Closed scene	25.5%	70.6%
	Both	22.5%	67.5%
Working arrangement	Independent	29.6%	64.8%
	Under management or both	17.2%	79.3%
Gender identity	Cis women	24.4%	71.5%
	Trans women	30.0%	62.5%
	Cis men	28.6%	71.4%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	8.3%	91.7%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	28.6%	67.2%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	20.6%	73.0%
Migration status	Migrants	33.3%	61.9%
	Non-migrants	22.4%	73.3%

TABLE 8: SEX WORKERS' WILLINGNESS TO APPROACH POLICE FOR SAFETY (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: Would you go to the police to keep yourself and your colleagues safe?

n=182		Yes	No
Overall for participants		**40.7%**	**41.8%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	65.8%	23.7%
	Swedish model	17.9%	67.9%
	Partial criminalisation	40.4%	47.4%
	Regulation	35.6%	35.6%
Work setting	Open scene	42.4%	42.4%
	Closed scene	41.0%	40.0%
	Both	37.5%	47.5%
Working arrangement	Independent	47.9%	37.2%
	Under management or both	27.6%	48.3%
Gender identity	Cis women	39.3%	41.0%
	Trans women	51.3%	30.8%
	Cis men	20.0%	20.0%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	25.0%	58.3%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	46.6%	40.5%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	27.4%	45.2%
Migration status	Migrants	46.8%	38.7%
	Non-migrants	36.6%	43.8%

TABLE 9: CONFISCATION OF ASSETS AND SAFER SEX MATERIALS (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

When answer is YES

		Confiscation of assets	Confiscation of safer sex materials
		n=174	n=170
Overall for participants		**29.3%**	**14.1%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	22.5%	17.5%
	Swedish model	28.0%	4.2%
	Partial criminalisation	40.0%	12.8%
	Regulation	26.6%	18.6%
Work setting	Open scene	25.7%	12.1%
	Closed scene	24.7%	18.1%
	Both	47.4%	11.1%
Working arrangement	Independent	22.0%	11.6%
	Under management or both	48.9%	27.1%
Gender identity	Cis women	22.1%	14.3%
	Trans women	43.6%	16.7%
	Cis men	62.5%	25.0%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	30.0%	0.0%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	28.8%	15.5%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	29.8%	14.3%
Migration status	Migrants	27.3%	9.3%
	Non-migrants	28.8%	16.4%

TABLE 10: POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

When answer is YES

		Physical violence	Sexualised violence	Threats, coercion, and blackmail	Emotional abuse
		n=188	n=188	n=178	n=182
Overall for participants		**28.2%**	**26.6%**	**42.1%**	**68.7%**
Legal models and demographic markers					
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	40.0%	40.0%	40.0%	70.0%
	Swedish model	17.9%	18.5%	54.2%	81.8%
	Partial criminalisation	37.9%	32.1%	50.9%	75.4%
	Regulation	27.4%	16.9%	26.7%	57.1%
Work setting	Open scene	30.6%	27.0%	41.2%	57.1%
	Closed scene	23.8%	22.8%	40.2%	69.7%
	Both	57.1%	37.5%	56.4%	80.0%
Working arrangement	Independent	29.1%	25.2%	32.0%	64.0%
	Under management or both	39.7%	30.4%	66.7%	79.6%
Gender identity	Cis women	23.4%	23.6%	46.6%	63.6%
	Trans women	51.2%	44.2%	34.2%	78.0%
	Cis men	50.0%	0.0%	25.0%	71.4%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	27.3%	20.0%	45.5%	91.7%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	33.3%	28.3%	46.4%	68.9%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	29.7%	21.0%	38.7%	69.0%
Migration status	Migrants	32.8%	20.6%	35.0%	59.0%
	Non-migrants	30.8%	28.4%	47.3%	73.7%

TABLE 11: POLICE DISCRIMINATION AGAIN AGAINST SEX WORKERS (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: Have you ever experienced any kind of discriminatory treatment from police?

n=170		Yes	No
Overall for participants		**71.8%**	**23.5%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	65.8%	31.6%
	Swedish model	77.8%	11.1%
	Partial criminalisation	87.0%	8.7%
	Regulation	61.0%	35.6%
Work setting	Open scene	62.9%	34.3%
	Closed scene	72.8%	20.7%
	Both	77.1%	20.0%
Working arrangement	Independent	68.6%	28.0%
	Under management or both	81.3%	12.5%
Gender identity	Cis women	66.4%	28.2%
	Trans women	87.2%	12.8%
	Cis men	100.0%	0.0%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	58.3%	25.0%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	68.8%	27.5%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	77.8%	14.8%
Migration status	Migrants	64.8%	31.5%
	Non-migrants	74.1%	20.4%

TABLE 12: POSITIVE TREATMENT BY POLICE (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: Have you ever experienced any positive treatment by police?

n=180		Yes	No
Overall for participants		**53.9%**	**41.7%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	50.0%	47.5%
	Swedish model	61.5%	38.5%
	Partial criminalisation	56.9%	39.2%
	Regulation	51.6%	41.9%
Work setting	Open scene	48.4%	45.2%
	Closed scene	54.5%	41.4%
	Both	55.0%	42.5%
Working arrangement	Independent	55.7%	41.0%
	Under management or both	50.0%	44.4%
Gender identity	Cis women	49.1%	44.7%
	Trans women	62.5%	37.5%
	Cis men	55.6%	44.4%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	58.3%	41.7%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	52.6%	41.2%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	53.3%	46.7%
Migration status	Migrants	51.7%	39.7%
	Non-migrants	55.8%	42.5%

TABLE 13: SEX WORKERS' INTERACTION WITH POLICE WHEN DETAINED OR ARRESTED, AND AS VICTIMS OF CRIME (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

When answer is YES

		Detained, arrested, or taken to police station	Victims of crime
		n=195	n=188
Overall for participants		**60.0%**	**69.1%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	75.0%	71.8%
	Swedish model	39.3%	69.0%
	Partial criminalisation	66.7%	75.0%
	Regulation	53.7%	62.5%
Work setting	Open scene	73.0%	52.9%
	Closed scene	51.9%	68.6%
	Both	73.8%	85.0%
Working arrangement	Independent	55.0%	67.2%
	Under management or both	68.9%	76.7%
Gender identity	Cis women	53.5%	64.8%
	Trans women	84.1%	85.4%
	Cis men	37.5%	66.7%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	50.0%	58.3%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	65.6%	66.9%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	47.0%	70.8%
Migration status	Migrants	60.0%	62.9%
	Non-migrants	58.3%	71.2%

TABLE 14: POLICE FAILURE TO INTERVENE IN SEX WORKERS' VICTIMISATION (BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS)

Question: Have police ever failed to intervene when you have experienced any forms of violence?

n=163		Yes	No
Overall for participants		**54.0%**	**41.7%**
Legal models and demographic markers			
Legislative setting	Criminalisation	48.7%	51.3%
	Swedish model	57.1%	33.3%
	Partial criminalisation	63.0%	34.8%
	Regulation	49.1%	43.9%
Work setting	Open scene	52.8%	41.7%
	Closed scene	53.6%	41.7%
	Both	57.1%	40.0%
Working arrangement	Independent	50.9%	44.0%
	Under management or both	63.6%	34.1%
Gender identity	Cis women	49.5%	46.7%
	Trans women	67.6%	27.0%
	Cis men	66.7%	33.3%
	Trans men, non-binary, other	50.0%	40.0%
Sexuality	Heterosexual	49.0%	47.1%
	Gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, other	63.0%	31.5%
Migration status	Migrants	46.3%	48.1%
	Non-migrants	56.7%	39.4%

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